

Hurricane Laura, strongest to hit Louisiana in 150 years, brings damaging winds

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Hurricane Laura made land fall near Cameron, Louisiana south of Lake Charles early Thursday as an extremely dangerous Category 4 storm, with sustained winds reaching 150 miles per hour, making it the most powerful hurricane to hit Louisiana in 150 years. Nearly 2 million people in the coastal areas of Texas and Louisiana were subject to evacuation orders in the days before the powerful storm hit the region.

As of publication, there have been four recorded deaths in Louisiana, including a 14-year-old girl in the small town of Leesville when a tree fell on her family home.

Lake Charles, the fifth largest city in Louisiana, with a population of 75,000, suffered wind damage so extensive that Tylor Quebedeaux, a funeral director at Hixson Funeral Home, said it was “worse than Rita,” the Category 5 hurricane which killed 120 people across four states in 2005.

Over 600,000 homes and businesses lost power in Louisiana, including over 80,000 in Calcasieu Parish, where Lake Charles is located. Approximately 80,000 people lost power in Rapides, Evangeline, Iberia, and Avoyelles Parish, and another 12,000 lost power in Lafayette. Additionally, the Louisiana Department of Health stated that nearly 50 water systems became “inoperable,” affecting the ability of at least 100,000 people to access clean water.

The hurricane also caused a chemical fire to break out at the BioLab, Inc. industrial complex in Lake Charles Thursday morning, sending chlorine gas and other hazardous emissions into the air and the nearby lake. Wilma Subra, a chemist with the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, warned of the dangers, noting that “chlorine can damage the lung tissue permanently” when inhaled.

BioLab's parent corporation is the Toronto-based Kik Custom Products, which produces consumer products such as household cleaners and pool disinfectants. According to Nola.com, the plant “was categorized under federal standards as a major source of hazardous air pollutants.” The Environmental Protection Agency's National Air Toxics Assessment, released in August 2018, established that Calcasieu Parish, where BioLab is located, has one of the highest risks for cancer from air toxins in the US.

Elsewhere in the state, Interstate 10, a vital traffic artery for south Louisiana, was closed from the Atchafalaya Basin to

Texas Wednesday night, according to Lafayette Consolidated Government spokesman Jamie Angelle. The Isle of Capri, a riverboat casino, became dislodged by the storm and crashed into the Calcasieu River Bridge Lake Charles, which is a part of I-10. The bridge, which is over 60 years old, had already been given a “structurally deficient” rating by the US Department of Transportation, and a sufficiency rating of 6.6 out of 100 by the National Bridge Inventory.

After forming into a tropical depression in the Atlantic Ocean on August 19, Tropical Storm Laura entered the Gulf of Mexico Monday night. It rapidly strengthened into a hurricane, reaching Category 3 by Wednesday morning, and strengthened even further as it approached land. The storm quickly weakened to a Category 2 Thursday morning, and then to a Category 1 by mid-morning and back to tropical storm status at it moved inland throughout the day.

Before it made landfall, many forecasters gave alarming statements the Laura's impact across a large swathe of southeast Texas and southwest Louisiana would be “catastrophic,” with National Hurricane Center Director Ken Graham stating that the storm surge, peaking in some areas at 20 feet, would not be “survivable”.

“Unsurvivable is not a word that we like to use,” National Weather Service meteorologist Ben Schott told the *New Orleans Advocate*. “It's one I've never used before.” He later added, “I think the damage from this will be, unfortunately, devastating at a level where people will not be able to recognize the area they live in.”

Thankfully, the area was mostly spared from the devastating storm surge, with the surge reaching about half of the predictions of 18 to 20 feet. Chip Kline, head of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority board, said, “It would appear most of the damage that was inflicted on southwest Louisiana was from wind.” Nonetheless, there has been extensive flooding damage to buildings and homes in Cameron and Calcasieu Parish.

Nola.com reported that Laura is “the first major hurricane of the 2020 Atlantic season and is expected to be the strongest storm to make landfall in the US since 2018's Hurricane Michael pounded the Florida panhandle with strong Category 4 winds.” The Weather Channel stated that Laura is “the 7th

named storm to hit the continental US before the end of August,” a new record.

It is the second fastest hurricane ever to strengthen in the Gulf of Mexico, hitting land with more power than Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005. Laura made landfall with sustained winds of 150 mph and with a pressure recorded at 938 millibars. By comparison, Hurricane Katrina made landfall with winds of 125 mph, and a landfall pressure of 920 millibars.

As a tropical storm, Laura had already caused massive destruction in the Caribbean on its way into the Gulf. In Puerto Rico, tens of thousands lost power and water service, according to a briefing by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on August 23. Thousands were forced to evacuate in the Dominican Republic. Hundreds of homes were damaged, and at least three people died, including a 7-year-old boy and his mother.

In Haiti, almost two dozen people lost their lives due to flash flooding, including a 10-year-old girl and 10-month-old boy, and nearly 200 families were made homeless, according to the Haitian Civil Protection Office. More than 300,000 people were forced to evacuate in Cuba, and the tropical storm also caused landslides and swollen rivers in Jamaica.

Laura followed on the heels of Tropical Storm Marco, whose trajectory also placed it on a path heading towards the Louisiana coast. Forecasters feared Marco would also strengthen into a hurricane, marking the first time in history that two hurricanes developed in the Gulf of Mexico and hit land in quick succession. However, Marco weakened into a tropical depression on Monday night, eventually dissipating by Wednesday.

Mandatory evacuations were issued this week for the large area covering southeast Texas near the Louisiana state line over to Plaquemines Parish (county) in southeast Louisiana, affecting nearly 600,000 people. Nearly 400,000 residents were told to evacuate the Texas cities of Beaumont, Galveston and Port Arthur, along with Jasper, Jefferson, Newton and Orange counties.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also greatly complicated the situation facing evacuees. Texas has recorded more than 580,000 infections, and over 11,000 deaths, according to the state’s department of health. Louisiana has recorded over 144,000 cases so far—the highest per capita infection rate in the US—and over 4,500 deaths.

A recent study by scientists from Columbia University and the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), which quantified “how hurricane evacuation may affect” COVID-19 cases, found that the “origin and destination counties” of evacuees could see a rise in cases. In the best-case scenario, where evacuees relocate to areas with lower transmission rates, it stated that cases may rise up to 10,000. In the worst case, they could jump by as much as 61,000.

The hurricane will also likely cause a drop in testing for the

virus. Catherine Troisi, an infectious disease epidemiologist at UTHealth School of Public Health in Houston, noted that Hurricane Hanna, which made landfall in South Texas as a Category 1 storm in late July, already demonstrated this. “Part of the drop in testing that we saw a couple of weeks ago may have been due to Hurricane Hanna,” she said. “That is a big concern about testing now.”

Testing in Louisiana has been greatly curtailed in preparation for the hurricane, with only hospitals and clinics providing tests. This while Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards stated, “About half of our parishes are still well above 10 percent positivity.” In essence, as he stated, the state is “going to be blind this week on data to affect our decisions” during and in the aftermath of the hurricane.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Climate Prediction Center, a division of the National Weather Service, predicted an “above-normal 2020 Atlantic hurricane season” in late May. The season runs from June 1 to November 30, peaking in mid-September to early October. NOAA predicted at that time “a 60% chance of an above-normal season, a 30% chance of a near-normal season and only a 10% chance of a below-normal season.” It predicted 13-19 named storms, 6-10 hurricanes, and 3-6 major hurricanes.

Updating its hurricane season outlook on August 6, the NOAA predicted 19-25 named storms, 7-11 hurricanes, and 3-6 major hurricanes. Climate change-induced factors, such as warming sea surface temperatures, have led Gerry Bell, the lead seasonal hurricane forecaster at NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center, to state that “[t]his year, we expect more, stronger, and longer-lived storms than average, and our predicted ACE [Accumulated Cyclone Energy] range extends well above NOAA’s threshold for an extremely active season.”

As Hurricane Laura was making its way through Louisiana, two new systems were detected in the Atlantic, with one having a 30 percent chance of formation over the next five days.

As with the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling class in the US, from the federal down to the local level, has had an ample amount of time based on the predictions and analyses made by the scientific community to prepare for a more intense hurricane season. The yet-to-be-determined amount of damage, destruction, and deaths caused by Hurricane Laura and any future hurricanes has and will continue to expose the sheer incompetence and criminal indifference permeating the ruling class’s policies as the global capitalist crisis—with the degradation of the environment and natural disasters influenced by human-induced climate change being some of the effects—continues to deepen.



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