Slow-moving Hurricane Sally makes landfall along Alabama-Florida border

J. L'Heureau
17 September 2020

After strengthening and weakening multiple times after entering the Gulf of Mexico over the weekend, Hurricane Sally made landfall near Gulf Shores, Alabama as a Category 2 early Wednesday morning before diminishing to a tropical storm later in the day.

With close to 20 million people in its path, Sally brought coastal flooding, record rainfall, high winds and mass power outages to a large swath of the northern Gulf Coast, stretching from southeast Louisiana to the west central coast of Florida, forcing tens of thousands to evacuate their homes amidst the still raging COVID-19 pandemic. Some areas in the region saw over two feet of rain by early Wednesday and winds of up to 100 miles per hour.

So far one person has been confirmed killed and one person is missing in Orange Beach, Alabama, just east of Gulf Shores, in an incident which a city official said appeared to be water-related.

Less than a week ago the storm was classified as Tropical Depression 19 but went on to become the earliest recorded named tropical storm beginning with the letter 'S'. It became the fourth hurricane to hit the continental US during this year's hurricane season, a number which has not been seen since the 2004 season, and is the eighth storm so far this year to be named that has made landfall in the US, the highest number at this point during a hurricane season since 1916.

Sally intensified very rapidly, from a tropical storm into a Category 1 hurricane in less than two hours on Monday. It became a Category 2 on Tuesday night, prompting Richard Pasch, a senior hurricane specialist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Hurricane Center (NHC), to warn that "Sally is expected to be a dangerous hurricane when it moves onshore along the north-central Gulf Coast," echoing the warnings made about Hurricane Laura's rapid intensification before it made landfall on August 27. Sally's intensification was "due to expected light wind shear and very warm water" in the Gulf of Mexico, according to NHC Senior Hurricane Specialist Eric Blake.

Exacerbated by the record slow speed—reaching just 2 mph at one point—at which the hurricane moved towards the Alabama-Florida border, it began dropping torrential rains and caused flooding to the coastal areas before it made landfall. Ed Rappaport, deputy director of the NHC, told the Associated Press (AP) that "Sally has a characteristic that isn't often seen and that's a slow forward speed and that's going to exacerbate the flooding," comparing the storm to Hurricane Harvey, which caused catastrophic damage to the Houston, Texas area in 2017.

Commenting on the slow speed of the hurricane, Brian McNoldy, a hurricane researcher at the University of Miami, told the AP that, "A hurricane moving at 2 mph is stalled for all intents and purposes," adding that "If they aren't moving along and they just kind of sit there, you're going to get a ridiculous amount of rain."

Commenting on the experience of Hurricane Harvey, which is one of several hurricanes which have "stalled" around the world in the recent period, Timothy Hall, senior research scientist at the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, told *Popular Science* that upon settling over Houston, the hurricane acted "as a conveyor belt, just dumping huge amounts of warm Gulf water onto Houston." Hurricane Florence acted in a similar fashion, breaking almost 30 flood records when it drenched the Carolinas in 2018.

The area from Dauphin Island, Alabama eastward to the Florida panhandle felt the impacts from Hurricane Sally on Tuesday before it made landfall. Over four

© World Socialist Web Site

inches of rain had fallen in Baldwin County, Alabama, which includes Gulf Shores, with the same amount accumulating over a large portion of the western Florida panhandle by midday Tuesday. Flooding also occurred as far west as Plaquemines Parish (or county) in Louisiana. Since landfall, there has been disastrous flooding reported in areas such as Orange Beach, with other coastal areas like Quietwater Beach near Pensacola being completely submerged.

Over 500,000 homes and businesses were subject to a loss of electricity as Hurricane Sally made landfall, including 150,000 Alabama Power customers in the Mobile area.

Commenting on the "stalled" patten the hurricane took, NHC director Ken Graham told CNN that "nothing is going to go away anytime soon. The winds, the torrential rainfall, the slow movement and the storm surge—this is a dangerous situation all around."

Meteorologist Jason Beamon, speaking to Nola.com, warned, "Numerous rivers are forecast to reach major flood stage, with a few rivers in southwest Alabama/northwest Florida forecast to come close to record stage." Portions of central Alabama and Georgia, as well as parts of the Carolinas, have been put under flash flood warnings as the storm system makes it way towards the Atlantic throughout the week.

Rescues of people in neighborhoods littered with homes that have been flooded and suffered roof damage from fallen trees are already been conducted in Baldwin County in Alabama and Escambia County in Florida. David Morgan, the sheriff of Escambia County, said "the evacuations could literally be in the thousands."

A fallen crane knocked out a large portion of the Pensacola Bay Bridge, which connects Pensacola to Gulf Breeze, Florida, leaving residents in the latter area isolated.

With mid-September marking the traditional peak of the Atlantic hurricane season, this year has seen an extremely active one. This season marked the first time since 1971, according to CBS News, that five tropical cyclones swirled simultaneously in the Atlantic basin, which includes the Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the Gulf of Mexico.

Combined with slow-moving tropical storms and hurricanes, and increased humidity levels that facilitate the retention of moisture in the air, human-induced climate change, which is causing warming sea surface temperatures, is compounding the rate of development and growth of hurricanes. Since 2017, there have been more hurricanes reaching categories 4 and 5, which have also rapidly intensified before making landfall. Michael Brennan at the NHC told Nola.com that "[w]e didn't have many for a very long period of time, and we've had a lot here in the last few years."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote Monday on the wildfires currently ravaging the US West Coast: "Like hurricanes on the East Coast and in states on the Gulf of Mexico, the likelihood of natural disasters that form a "perfect storm" of weather conditions increases as global warming continues unabated. Hurricanes such as Sandy, Harvey and Maria, once thought of as 'storms of the century,' are now expected to happen once every 16 years. The same is true of the infernos now raging."

"As long as a handful of billionaires dominates society, with every aspect of economic life geared to their personal enrichment, not a single social problem—including climate change—can be solved."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site