

# Devastation left in the wake of Hurricanes Sally and Laura along the US Gulf Coast

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Power restorations, debris hauling, and the rebuilding of damaged critical infrastructure continue in communities along the northern Gulf Coast portion of Florida and southern Alabama in the wake of Hurricane Sally, which made landfall as a Category 2 last Wednesday in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

But amidst the widespread flood damage, mass power outages, prolonged boil water advisories, and water rescues, the Gulf region of the contiguous US, home to 64 million people, remains lodged in the crosshairs of a historically overactive hurricane season.

Though its original path placed the city of New Orleans and the southwest Mississippi coast as its center for landfall, Hurricane Sally, made a sharp eastward turn towards the Alabama-Florida border before making landfall, causing almost 600,000 homes and businesses from southeast Louisiana over into the heart of Georgia to lose power at one point last week.

Sally brought torrential rain and major flooding to the area even before it made landfall. Less than a week later, there have already been seven reported deaths related to the Hurricane—two in Baldwin County, Alabama; two in Escambia County, Florida; and three in the Atlanta area.

Widespread flooding resulted from Hurricane Sally in a large area spanning from southeast Louisiana to as far as Tallahassee, Florida. Pensacola Fire Chief Ginny Cranor told CNN that "four months of rain" fell in "four hours"—well over 30 inches.

The storm surge was one of the worst Pensacola had ever experienced, at one point producing flooding up to a depth of five feet.

Describing the completely inadequate preparedness on the part of the ruling class to handle natural weather events, Amanda Marcial, a resident in Escambia County whose home flooded, told the *Pensacola News Journal* that "[e]very time it rains we live in fear," adding that "I am in what they say is a 100-year flood plain," but "it's flooded again" since a rainstorm flooded her home in April 2014.

At least 600 water rescues have been carried out in

Escambia and Santa Rosa counties in Florida in response to Hurricane Sally. Food, water, and tarp distribution sites had to be established in several locations throughout Escambia County, serving 20,000 cars up until last weekend. Responding to how badly the wind and floods damaged the area, Charles Baker, a resident of the Brownsville area of Pensacola, told the *Pensacola News Journal* that many "can't find anything. Not ice, water, anything right now."

The beachside cities of Orange Beach and Gulf Shores in Alabama saw heavy flooding. Many of the roadways turned into lakes. Orange Beach Mayor Tony Kennon contrasted Hurricane Sally with Hurricane Ivan, which struck the Alabama Gulf Coast in in 2004 as a Category 3. He said with the latter hurricane, "we had 11 to 12 inches of rain. With this, we had 20 plus."

Gulf Shores Mayor Robert Craft made a similar comparison in response to the flood damage to that city. A resident of the city, Doris Stiers, told CNN that the area looked "like a war zone," with "[l]ots of destruction, homes destroyed, roofs gone."

Other southern Alabama counties, such as Elba, saw severe flooding. Water rescues were also carried out in Orange Beach and Dauphin Island. As of Sunday morning, Baldwin EMC, the largest electrical provider in Baldwin County, which has a population of over 200,000, said that over 40,000 of its customers were still without power, with many facing "extended outages." The same day, Gulf Power said almost 21,000 of its customers throughout Escambia County in Florida were still without power.

At least \$180 million in damage to public and private property has been tallied so far by officials in Alabama and Florida. This includes \$19 million in Mobile County in Alabama, \$139 million in Escambia County, and \$21 million in Santa Rose County in Florida. As assessments to road and home damage to debris removal continues, the total amount of damage in these areas alone will undoubtedly increase.

Many farmers in the Panhandle, who are still suffering from the damage brought on by Hurricane Michael in 2018, are seeing tens of millions of dollars resulting from crop

damage. Nikki Fried, Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture, told the *Pensacola News Journal* that "it's probably going to be almost 100% losses on most of the farms." Donna Burkhead, the wife of a farmer, told the paper "[y]ou wake up from a hurricane, you go out to look at your crops and it's laying on the ground. There's only one word—devastating."

Such despair rings true for the residents of southwest Louisiana, many of whom continue to have their lives upended by the damage wrought by Hurricane Laura, which struck the area as a Category 4 only three weeks before Sally made landfall. \$1.6 billion in damage was done to agriculture—including to the rice and sugar cane crops—and forests in Louisiana, more than the damage inflicted by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

Kurt Guidry at the Louisiana State University AgCenter told Nola.com that "the total economic impact to the food and fiber sector from Hurricane Laura will be as large as or larger than any storm that I have developed estimates for since my time with the AgCenter."

The Calcasieu Parish School District, which has about 32,000 students, suffered damage up to \$300 million, more than the \$26 million caused by Hurricane Rita. District Superintendent Karl Bruchhaus said all but two of the 76 schools were damaged, and less than half of the district's 350 school buses are operable.

Statewide, 35 percent of the school districts have been impaired, with almost 150 buildings on over a dozen college campuses being damaged.

Even this, however, has not stopped the heads of some colleges and universities in Lake Charles—an area of the state that has seen some of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases—from enforcing the irrational and homicidal back-to-school campaign, with classes already resuming at McNeese State University. President Daryl Burckel told Nola.com that "We have a very aggressive plan to make our students know we will be back, that they will be taken care of," and that "The most important thing is to get them through this semester."

There have been 14 billion-dollar weather disasters in the US so far this year, with the month of August alone seeing four of these disasters, according to a report released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released last Thursday.

This includes Hurricane Isaias, which impacted over five million homes and businesses from North Carolina up to New England; the Midwest Derecho, which destroyed almost 10,000 homes in Iowa and caused at least \$4 billion in damage in that state; the ongoing West Coast wildfires, which have destroyed thousands of homes and buildings; and Hurricane Laura.

The human cost of these disasters is incalculable.

This year's Atlantic hurricane season, which runs from June until the end of November, has seen 23 named storms, almost double the average, and will likely produce more storms than the 27 named storms of the 2005 season. Last Friday alone saw the formation of three storms, Wilfred, Alpha, and Beta (the naming system is now using the Greek alphabet), the first time this phenomenon has occurred since 1893. Tropical Storm Beta, already affecting millions with heavy rain and flooding along southeast Texas and southern Louisiana, is scheduled to impact the area for the duration of this week.

Amidst the material and human costs these increasingly frequent and dangerous natural weather events are causing, irrefutably conditioned by human-induced climate change, the political representatives of the ruling capitalist class continue to place on full display their irrational and anti-scientific character.

In an article published by the *Washington Post* over the weekend, Craig Brown, Mayor Pro Tem of Galveston, Texas, dismissed the need to address climate change, writing, "As mayor of a city dealing with that problem and trying to prepare your city and keep your citizens safe, the reasons for [these disasters] go out the window."

In the lead up to Hurricane Sally, Cynthia Lees Sheng, president of Jefferson Parish in Louisiana, said at a press conference on September 13 that "What happened in the past doesn't matter," and that "We handle every threat the same... You can't say, 'I'm tired of this, I don't want to do it.'"

Even more noxious is the nationalism sprinkled on top of this criminal outlook, evinced by Orange Beach mayor Kennon when he told the *Post* that "if you're serious about climate change, you need to stand up to China, India, everyone in the world that has absolutely no regard for the climate. Those culprits who are 90 percent of the polluters need to be held accountable. Otherwise, it's just political, or a game or something."



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