

Floodwaters breed deadly flesh-eating bacteria

## **Weeks after landfall, Hurricane Ian leaves thousands displaced, financially ruined**

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Nearly a month after the catastrophic landfall of Hurricane Ian in Florida, thousands of residents remain displaced and financially devastated while little to nothing has been done by federal or state authorities to alleviate the burdens on residents and enable them to rebuild.

The official death toll from Ian now stands at 140 with 129 deaths recorded in Florida, five deaths in each of Cuba and North Carolina and one death in Virginia.

Financial losses from floods and storm surges amount to well over \$67 billion. Naples, Fort Myers and other locations in the state's southwestern region bordering the Gulf of Mexico have suffered the most extensive destruction from one of the most powerful storms ever to hit the US.

As of last week, some 476 people remained at two shelters in Lee County. More than 5,000 residential properties have been destroyed, while 13,052 have incurred major damage. Most of those living in shelters are unable to rely on second homes, relatives or rental properties while awaiting financial assistance.

In addition to residential destruction, Ian is responsible for between \$787 million and \$1.56 billion in agricultural losses in Florida, according to a preliminary estimate. The hurricane rammed into around five million acres of agricultural lands.

Among the most significantly impacted were Florida's citrus crop, along with vegetables, melons and livestock. Florida leads the nation in orange production for juice but the industry has been battered in recent years by hurricanes such as Irma in 2017 and now Ian.

The recurrence of violent storms and their escalating ferocity point to the indifference and inaction of

governments, which refuse to heed the warnings of climate scientists regarding global warming and its consequences for human life and the environment.

The storm has made many homeless, unemployed and stranded, including newcomers to the state's most devastated parts who are without connections or resources. One single mother of two young boys from Fort Myers told the media she did not have a car or formal lease before the storm, while her roommate, who was critical in meeting the \$1,200 rent, died shortly before the storm hit.

President Joe Biden has maintained a stony silence in the wake of Ian following a brief visit to Florida earlier this month during which he made a point of appearing with the fascistic Republican Governor Ron DeSantis to demonstrate his "bipartisanship." DeSantis, meanwhile, has denounced all critics who have pointed to the lack of preplanning and preparation for the hurricane and the dearth of aid for those impacted.

DeSantis thanked Biden for helping facilitate "good coordination with the White House and with FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]," while working class families are having to wait long hours to get in touch with FEMA officials and many have gotten little to no response.

DeSantis traveled to Punta Gorda on Saturday and announced that the Florida Housing Finance Corporation would disperse a measly \$5 million to help residents pay their overpriced insurance deductibles.

The agency's executive director, Trey Price, admitted that "Hurricane deductibles are larger than typical deductibles for home damages," and that "many people impacted aren't prepared to put up thousands of dollars to begin with."

According to estimates from the financial services company Fitch Ratings, insured losses from the storm are expected to range from \$25 billion to \$40 billion. Data posted on the Florida Office of Insurance Regulation's website revealed that the first batch of insurance claims from Ian has already surpassed \$474 million.

A press release that accompanied DeSantis' speech noted that the US Army Corps of Engineers had thus far allotted 7,000 households "Blue Roofs" to prevent any further damage to homes. However, as the release indicates, this is only a "temporary solution" for impacted low-income families.

The press release was also significant in regard to the regions selected by the DeSantis administration for assistance. Counties such as Lee and Charlotte are heavily Republican and were therefore prioritized for electoral purposes. But no substantial assistance is being offered to residents of Orange County, a largely Democratic county, which suffered more than \$200 million in damage due to Ian, including damage to 1,231 residential properties estimated at \$46 million.

DeSantis signed an executive order Thursday extending early voting and mail ballot access for voters in three Republican counties affected by Ian, while leaving out entirely residents in Orange and other Democratic-leaning counties in the state's central region, which also suffered severe damage.

Meanwhile, some regions in Florida impacted by Ian are seeing the spread of deadly flesh-eating bacteria that thrive in the state's floodwaters. According to the Florida Department of Health, the state has seen 64 cases of *vibrio vulnificus* and 11 deaths from the bacterium in 2022. Lee County accounts for 45 percent of the cases so far.

Bacteria counts are known to increase during the warmer summer and early fall months. Hurricanes like Ian exacerbate their presence in Florida's coastal waters due to sewage spills. Of the 64 infections so far this year, 26 have occurred in Lee County since the hurricane made landfall. Twenty-seven of Florida's 64 cases have occurred since the hurricane.

Lee County, the home of Fort Myers and Sanibel Island, has reported 29 confirmed cases and four deaths so far this year, after reporting five cases and one death last year and no cases in 2020. The skin infection itself, necrotizing fasciitis, is especially dangerous for people

who are immunocompromised. The bacteria can enter the body through an open wound or scratch and produce life-threatening complications such as sepsis, organ shock and organ failure.

Death from the disease occurs in about one in five cases and generally comes a day or two after the victim has fallen sick.

According to Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College, "The Gulf Coast is the epicenter of disease like this. You have a mix of climate change, poverty and aggressive urbanization, all contributing to the exacerbation of vibrio infections and an increase of other diseases like dengue, zika and parasitic infections."



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