

Tropical Storm Hilary hits US and Mexico, threatening flooding and devastation

Adam Mclean
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Tropical Storm Hilary, which made landfall Sunday morning in Baja California as a hurricane, crossed the US-Mexico border late Sunday afternoon local time after weakening. Although downgraded to a tropical storm, this reflects mainly a reduction in wind speeds to below 75 miles per hour. But the storm still produced unprecedented rainfall across a region approximately 20 miles east of the major urban centers of San Diego and Los Angeles.

Hilary was the first named storm to hit Southern California since Tropical Storm Nora in 1997 and would have been the first hurricane to hit the region in nearly a century.

It dealt a savage blow to parts of Baja California in northern Mexico, killing at least one man in Santa Rosalía, whose car was swept off the road. In California, residents of the Channel Islands and, in particular, Catalina Island, home to some 4,000 people, have been advised to evacuate. Over the next 24 hours, the storm is tracking to pass over the Sierra Nevada Mountains and into western Nevada, perhaps reaching as far north as Reno before fully dissipating.

Overnight, the storm is expected to bring flooding, strong winds and potentially lethal mudslides as it travels north. States of emergency have been declared in California and Nevada and in a number of cities and towns in the path of the storm. In San Diego County, the weather service said that boulders were rolling in the town of Julian, and a tornado warning was issued for the broader Alpine area. Videos posted on twitter have shown only a part of the unfolding catastrophe. On top of the storm, the California city of Ojai experienced a 5.0 earthquake at 2:40 p.m. Pacific Daylight Time (PDT) on Sunday.

The Southwest US and northwest of Mexico are well known for their arid and desert climates, and those who

live there have virtually no experience with storms of this magnitude. Since meteorologists began reporting on Hilary three days ago, there have been runs on grocery stores, with some running out of bottled water.

The infrastructure in the Southwest—at least, where it is appropriately funded—is typically built to withstand earthquakes, a much more familiar threat, but not to withstand high winds or flooding. Early projections showed that Hilary could dump as much water on California in a day as the state usually gets in a year.

The area's ecosystem is also expected to be overwhelmed by the storm. Soil, under conditions of chronic drought, where decades of wildfires have decimated vegetation, can quickly form mudflows and cause landslides once flooded. Just under a year ago, on August 24, 2022, a part of Interstate 10, connecting Southern California with Arizona, was washed away following a flash flood.

The last time a hurricane hit California directly was in 1939, and it caused blackouts, cut phone service and killed just under 100 people. In 1977, Hurricane Doreen—a Category 1 hurricane at its peak—hit Baja California, but bounced back into the Pacific and skirted along the California coast before dissipating over the Channel Islands. Though Doreen veered off into the Pacific, taking the worst of the storm off the mainland, it still killed eight people and swept six children away in the Los Angeles River, one of whom was among the dead.

Storm systems sometimes form over the Pacific along North America's West Coast, but they are uncommon, and they rarely grow and even more rarely make landfall. Hurricanes require warm water to sustain themselves, and starved of this, they die off.

Due to a phenomenon called “upwelling,” in which cold, deep seawater rises to the top, the surface of the

Pacific Ocean is typically cool, often surprisingly so to visitors. This usually frustrates the formation and sustaining of tropical storms in the Pacific. This year, however, has seen record-breaking heat, and ocean temperatures have broken records. Ocean temperatures off the coast of Florida hit nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit this summer, killing marine life.

There are two main reasons for the abnormally hot water in the Pacific Ocean that is driving Tropical Storm Hilary. First and more immediately, this year has seen the return of El Niño, the warming cycle in the El Niño Southern Oscillation, which is well studied and is known to affect the global climate. It also in part explains this year's record land temperatures. In a recent analysis of 2023's heat records, the WSWS noted: "This year's El Niño is just beginning, and it will likely contribute to an already disaster-packed 2023."

More fundamentally, however, temperatures have reached new and higher sustained averages in and out of the El Niño cycle that cannot be accounted for by the strictly "natural" oscillations of the global climate. Climate change, a product of capitalism and a challenge which world governments do not have the ability nor the desire to address, has produced higher and higher annual temperatures.

The year 2023 is breaking heat records, but the breaking of heat records is not novel for the 21st century. The top 10 hottest years on record, since they were first recorded in the 19th century, have all happened in the last two decades. Aside from this year, the last five hottest years on record were, in order, 2020, 2016, 2019, 2015 and 2017. All of these years were at least 0.6 degree Celsius (just over 1 degree Fahrenheit) above the 20th century average. Part of the reason that 2021 and 2022 are not included here may be that La Niña, El Niño's opposing climate pattern, was dominant in those years and affected a relative cooling of the global climate.

Tropical Storm Hilary comes less than two weeks after the wildfire in Maui that destroyed Lahaina and killed more than 100 people, and less than a week after the wildfires in Canada's Northwest Territories forced 22,000 to flee the province's capital Yellowknife. Like these wildfires, Hilary is another instance of "extreme weather" created and exacerbated by climate change.

To this, it must be added that the storm comes in the

midst of a new surge of COVID-19. Wastewater figures have shown that the virus is on the rise in the US, and scientists have recently announced the discovery of a new and rapidly spreading strain of the virus that has been given the name "Pirola."

In their response to both a pandemic that has killed millions and wildfires that have ravaged regions from the tropics of Hawaii to the Canadian tundra, the ruling class has demonstrated an utterly criminal negligence that has resulted in the death and destitution of untold millions.

The official response to climate change has taken the form of the feckless Kyoto and Paris accords. These have barely done anything to reduce CO₂ emissions. The more rapacious elements of the ruling class will still deny that climate change even exists.



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