

Hurricane Florence: Evacuations continue as North Carolina rivers rise

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About 6,000 to 8,000 people in Georgetown County, South Carolina, were alerted to be prepared to evacuate potential flood zones ahead of a 'record event' of up to 10 feet (3 meters) of flooding, which is expected to begin on Tuesday.

Dozens of homes are surrounded by floodwaters brought to the area by Hurricane Florence in Pender County, N.C., on Saturday, Sept. 22, 2018. (AP)

Florence is by no means done swamping the Carolinas, where rivers remain high above flood stage and thousands of people were told to plan to leave their homes Monday.

About 6,000 to 8,000 people in Georgetown County, South Carolina, were alerted to be prepared to evacuate potential flood zones ahead of a "record event" of up to 10 feet (3 meters) of flooding, which is expected to begin Tuesday near parts of the Pee Dee and Waccamaw rivers, county spokeswoman Jackie Broach-Akers said.

Residents along the Waccamaw were bracing for water expected to peak Wednesday at 22 feet (6.7 meters) near Conway. That's twice the normal flood stage, and far higher than the previous record of 17.9 feet (5.5 meters), according to charts published by the National Weather Service on Monday.

The Cape Fear and Neuse rivers also remain swollen, and aren't expected to return to normal levels until October, the charts show.

The county's emergency management director, Sam Hodge, said in a video message posted online that authorities are closely watching river gauges, and law enforcement would be going door to door in any threatened areas.

"From boots on the ground to technology that we have, we are trying to be able to get the message out," Hodge said, warning people not to wait for an official evacuation order if they begin to feel unsafe.

Parts of Interstate 40 are expected to remain underwater for another week or more, and hundreds of smaller roads remain impassable, but there was some good news: Interstate 95 was reopened to all traffic Sunday night for the first time since the floods, North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper announced.

In this Friday, Sept. 21, 2018 photo, floodwaters surround a home in Pender County, N.C., in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence. (Kristen Zeis/The Virginian-Pilot via AP)

Floodwaters already receding on one stretch of Interstate 40 left thousands of rotting fish on the pavement for firefighters to clean up. Video showed firefighters blasting the dead fish off the highway with a fire hose in Pender County in eastern North Carolina. The local fire department posted online: "We can add 'washing fish off of the interstate' to the long list of interesting things firefighters get to experience."

North Carolina Emergency Management Director Michael Sprayberry said major flooding is continuing in eastern counties along the Black, Lumber, Neuse and Cape Fear rivers.

“Florence continues to bring misery to North Carolina,” Cooper said in a statement Sunday evening. He added that crews conducted about 350 rescues over the weekend and that travel remains treacherous in the southeastern area of his state. But he said National Guard members would be shifting next to more door-to-door and air search wellness checks on people in still-flooded areas.

The storm has claimed at least 43 lives since slamming into the coast Sept. 14.

In Washington, lawmakers are considering almost \$1.7 billion in new money for disaster relief and recovery, even as they face a deadline this week to fund the government before the Oct. 1 start of the new budget year.

The chairman of the House Appropriations Committee said the money would be available as grants to states to help rebuild housing and public works, as well as assist businesses as they recover. GOP Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen of New Jersey called it “a first round” and said lawmakers are ready to act quickly if the federal disaster relief agency also needs more money.

Dead fish lie around the edges of Greenfield Lake in Wilmington, NC, Sunday, September 23, 2018. The fish began dying following the landfall of Hurricane Florence but no official explanation has been given by the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality. (Matt Born/The Star-News via AP)

An economic research firm estimated that Florence has caused around \$44 billion in damage and lost output, which would make it one of the 10 costliest U.S. hurricanes. The worst disaster, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, cost \$192.2 billion in today’s dollars, while last year’s Hurricane Harvey cost \$133.5 billion. Moody’s Analytics offered a preliminary estimate that Florence has caused \$40 billion in damage and \$4 billion in lost economic output.

In other developments, at least three wild horse herds survived Florence on North Carolina’s Outer Banks, but caretakers were still trying to account for one herd living on a hard-hit barrier island, the News & Observer reported Sunday. Staff members are planning to make trips to the island this week to check on the Shackleford Banks herd.

North Carolina environmental officials also said they’re closely monitoring two sites where Florence’s floodwaters have inundated coal ash sites .

Elsewhere in the tropics, Subtropical Storm Leslie maintained maximum sustained winds of 40 mph (65 kph) while drifting east over the central Atlantic, and Tropical Depression Kirk dissipated over open waters.

- AP