Tropical Storm Helene to become major hurricane before landfall in Florida: Live updates

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Florida and much of the Southeast were bracing Wednesday for a powerful blast from Tropical Storm Helene, gaining strength and forecast to make landfall Thursday as a devastating, Category 3 hurricane.

The National Hurricane Center warned that Helene would reach hurricane status Wednesday and rapidly strengthen over the eastern Gulf of Mexico. AccuWeather forecasters were predicting Helene could reach Category 4 strength in the Gulf, with maximum sustained winds ranging between 130 and 156 mph, before making landfall as a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 111-129 mph.

The highest landfall probability was somewhere along the eastern part of the Florida Panhandle – including the Big Bend area, the curve of Florida's peninsula around the Gulf of Mexico – late Thursday, forecasters said. Near where Helene makes landfall, general rainfall of 8-12 inches is forecast, with 2 feet of rain possible in isolated areas.

“This could be the storm that the 2024 hurricane season is remembered for," AccuWeather Chief Meteorologist Jon Porter said.

Storm tracker: See projected path of Tropical Storm Helene set to become a hurricane

Developments:

■ The storm was centered about 60 miles east-northeast of Cozumel, Mexico, early Wednesday, the hurricane center said. Helene was driving sustained winds of 70 mph, almost hurricane strength, and was moving northwest at 9 mph.

■ The hurricane center said swells generated by Helene will spread northward toward the west coast of Florida and the northeastern Gulf Coast late Wednesday and Thursday, likely causing "life-threatening surf and rip current conditions."

■ Tornadoes were possible late Wednesday on the western Florida Peninsula and southern Alabama. The risk of tornadoes expands Thursday across Florida and into parts of Georgia and South Carolina, the hurricane center said.

■ Over 3 million people in Florida and Georgia live in areas under a hurricane warning, the National Weather Service said. Additionally, over 39 million people, including the entirety of the Tampa, Miami, Orlando, and Jacksonville metro areas, were under a tropical storm warning.

Helene's explosive forecast one of the 'most aggressive' in hurricane history

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Florida counties issue evacuation orders ahead of Helene

Three counties in the Big Bend coast of Florida, where storm surge could reach heights of 15 feet, issued mandatory evacuation orders for all residents and visitors in its jurisdiction. Officials in Wakulla, Franklin and Taylor counties – home to about 69,000 people – warned residents of the danger posed by the storm and urged them to take it seriously.

“Hurricane Helene is predicted to be a catastrophic and life threatening storm system,” the Taylor County Sheriff’s Office said on Facebook. “This system will be unlike anything we have experienced to date. A curfew is effective from sunset to sunrise. Repeat, this is a MANDATORY EVACUATION ORDER for everyone.”

Seventeen other counties stretching across the western coast of the state, from the Panhandle to just south of Sarasota, announced mandatory or voluntary evacuations, according to the Florida Division of Emergency Management. Across the state, officials announced closures of government offices and facilities as well as public schools and several major universities.

Helene forecast is a ‘nightmare scenario’ for parts of North Florida, weather service says

Rick Minor, a county commissioner in Leon County, which encompasses Tallahassee, urged residents to take the approaching storm seriously.

In an email to constituents on Tuesday night, Minor said he was briefed by Leon County Emergency Management officials, who said that if the current track holds, Leon County will suffer a direct hit.

"On Thursday we'll face about six hours of sustained winds of 74-110 mph, leading to thousands of downed trees, more than a hundred blocked roads, hundreds of damaged structures, and many, many days of extended power outages," he said. "But we mustn't panic — fortunately, we all have enough time to carefully plan and prepare."

According to the National Weather Service in Tallahassee, Helene could render some areas "uninhabitable for weeks or months."

Widespread power and communications outages also are expected for prolonged periods.

For those living in Wakulla, Franklin and Taylor counties, National Weather Service forecasters offered a grim wakeup call hours after emergency managers ordered all county residents to evacuate: "This forecast, if realized, is a nightmare surge scenario for Apalachee Bay. Please, please, please take any evacuation orders seriously."

What is storm surge and what makes the Gulf vulnerable during Helene?

Along with powerful wind speeds and high rainfall amounts, another deadly hazard is a major concern for the western coast of Florida: storm surge.

In the open ocean, hurricane winds push water toward the center of the storm and instead of piling up, the water spirals downward and flows outward.

As the water is pushed downward, some is pushed out to sea and some is pushed toward the coast. As the storm approaches land and shallow water, the ocean floor blocks the outflowing water, causing the ocean to surge onto land.

Forecasters predict the Helene will wallop the Big Bend coast of Florida with a surge of water as high as 15 feet, while other coastal areas, such as Tampa Bay, could see 8 feet of water. The storm is expected to rapidly intensify into a major hurricane as it churns over the warm waters of the Gulf.

Among the factors making coastal communities along the Gulf of Mexico more vulnerable to piling water is its continental shelves that extend well over 100 miles from the shore. On the Atlantic coast, narrower shelves with steep slopes produce a lower surge.

– Javier Zarracina, Ramon Padilla, Stephen J. Beard, Dinah Voyles Pulver

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DeSantis urges Florida residents to prepare for Helene

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said Floridians should prepare for a potential major hurricane after he expanded his state of emergency declaration to 61 counties.

"Right now you do have time, so take advantage of that time," DeSantis said. "Review your plan and make sure you're executing your hurricane preparedness plan."

"Don't get wedded to these cones. You could be out of the cone and still have major impacts."

Helene, expected to intensify rapidly, prompts hurricane warning for Florida Gulf Coast

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Helene disrupts Gulf oil production

U.S. oil producers scrambled Monday to evacuate staff from Gulf of Mexico oil production platforms as the second hurricane in two weeks was predicted to tear through offshore oil-producing fields.

Oil companies BP, Chevron, and Shell have begun evacuating offshore staff, and several have paused some production. Just two weeks ago, Hurricane Francine roared across the Gulf of Mexico, peaking as a Category 2 with 100-mph winds as it made landfall in Louisiana.

Helene would be Florida's 9th major hurricane hit since 2000

The storm is forecast to become a major hurricane, a Category 3, before approaching the Florida Gulf Coast on Thursday, the National Hurricane Center said.

According to Colorado State University hurricane researcher Phil Klotzbach, eight major hurricanes have made landfall in Florida since 2000: Charley and Jeanne in 2004; Dennis and Wilma in 2005; Irma in 2017; Michael in 2018; Ian in 2022; Idalia in 2023.

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