

## HURRICANES

# Forecasters predict active hurricane season. Sheltering amid pandemic will complicate things

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The coronavirus pandemic will collide in coming months with an abnormally active Atlantic hurricane season, throwing a wrench in typical evacuation protocols and confronting those at the Jersey Shore with a fraught decision: stay in isolation and face the storm — or leave for a shelter and risk infection.

Atlantic hurricane season officially begins June 1, and forecasters predict a fifth consecutive year of above-average activity. And while the dire outlooks do not predict whether storms will make landfall, authorities are racing to prepare for a potential double menace, known as a compound event.

The need for social distancing means some shelter sites currently in evacuation plans are now inadequate, said Ocean County Sheriff Michael Mastronardy, who coordinates the county's emergency management and is advising state authorities about compound events.

“We have primary shelters that we use,” Mastronardy said. “But in this case, you can't put cots next to each other. We would need twice as much space or more as we had in the past.”

The Red Cross operates most emergency shelters and works with state authorities “to follow their lead whenever there's something large,” said Rosie Taravella, CEO of the Red Cross New Jersey Region. The agency works with municipal officials for more localized events, such as fires.

“Our blue-sky job is to constantly look for opportunities to create shelter agreements,” Taravella said. “The challenge will be to create more social distancing. We need to have those memoranda of agreements in place with facilities that are large enough.”

But spur-of-the-moment decisions about shelter locations and how to spread out cots are just the beginning.

Authorities are planning staggered meal times and extra space in dining areas to accommodate social distancing, Taravella said. Anyone who enters a shelter will undergo a health screening process. Shelters will have extra handwashing stations, and evacuees will undergo more frequent wellness checks. Shelters will also have an isolation care area — much like what has been done previously for people with the flu, but more extensive.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends including hand sanitizer or soap and two cloth face coverings per person, among typical essentials, in evacuation kits. The state hurricane survival guide, updated for 2020, does not include COVID-19 guidance.

But Taravella and Mastronardy said shelters will provide those items — and are already stockpiling them as the season nears.

Mastronardy, whose county has seen more than 8,000 COVID-19 cases and more than 650 related deaths, was less concerned about evacuees flouting face covering requirements.

“We’re looking to educate people and deal with it,” he said. “People are stressed out right now.”

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Responses during previous major weather events without simultaneous pandemics were marred with disarray, said Karen O’Neill, a Rutgers University professor and sociologist who studies land and water policies — including institutional responses to Hurricane Sandy.

The makeshift nature of responses during prior events — both in evacuation shelter locations and in the relationships among people tapped to lead the charge — has left people with little clarity about how entities such as the Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency function, O’Neill said. Scattered coordination and inconsistent messaging placed question marks on which shelter locations were open — and even the meaning of town-by-town terminology intended to guide residents during emergencies.

“I think it’s going to be a real patchwork,” she added. “This is a moving target.”

A successful response to a hurricane amid a pandemic will hinge on communication, experts said.

Short of a few tips from the CDC and a FEMA document released this week, little guidance combining COVID-19 and hurricane preparedness is available online.

“I am not inspired with confidence having looked at state and federal websites,” O’Neill said. “We have to expect no guidance from the feds. The state will be doing what it can.”

The state Office of Emergency Management “takes an all-hazards approach to emergency preparedness planning that focuses on capacities and capabilities that are critical to preparedness for a full spectrum of emergencies or disasters,” Laura Connolly, an OEM spokesperson, said in an email.

“We currently have a virtual joint information center stood up to ensure COVID-19 communications are consistent and accurate,” she added. “We interface with our partners at the NJ Department of Health each day as well as our state and federal emergency management partners. We would continue with this model of communication should a severe weather event occur.”

Ultimately, much of the response will fall on local emergency managers — many of whom are volunteers — who could be forced to make challenging calls in the coming months.

Evacuation orders must come sooner than usual to allow people to find shelters, a more challenging feat given social distancing, O'Neill said.

But if those calls are made too early — and the result isn't as damaging as expected — residents could become blasé about the warnings.

“They're running these sort of political, social, logistical calculations,” O'Neill said. “It's a terrible balancing act that officials have to weigh.”

Residents and visitors at the Shore — or even inland, which can be hit with life-threatening flooding, as North Jersey experienced from Hurricane Irene in 2011 — may be more doubtful, too. Long-term memory, even of Hurricane Sandy just eight years ago, is wavering, and the pandemic is far more front-of-mind.

“You have this churn in who lives there,” O'Neill said. “A lot of ownership shifted over to rental. You're dealing with a heterogeneous population.”

## **Active hurricane season**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 2020 Atlantic hurricane outlook, released Thursday, predicts a 60% chance of an above-normal season.

Forecasts anticipate six to 10 hurricanes, including two to six major hurricanes classified as Category 3 or higher. Category 3 storms have sustained wind speeds of 111 to 129 mph.

Experts predict the upcoming season, which runs to Nov. 30, will bring 13 to 19 named tropical storms in all.

“While there are early indications of an active tropical season in the Atlantic Basin, this doesn't necessarily mean New Jersey will receive a direct hit from or be sideswiped by one or more storms,” said David Robinson, New Jersey state climatologist and a Rutgers professor. “Still, with more storms in the basin, the odds of a damaging blow are raised here and elsewhere.”

### ***Story continues below the gallery***

The predictions take into consideration reflect the conditions of El Niños, which send warmer-than-normal Pacific Ocean water toward South America. This movement

generates strong winds from the southwest, which move east to the Atlantic and prevent hurricanes from forming.

But the El Niño conditions could weaken and transition to La Niña, the colder counterpart, by summer or fall, a trio of researchers from Colorado State University wrote in one forecast. La Niña conditions, which occur less regularly than El Niño, tend to produce more frequent and stronger hurricanes.

The Atlantic season's first tropical storm, Arthur, formed this month off the Florida coast and climbed up to North Carolina but did not make landfall.

A major Atlantic storm would not mark the first severe weather event during the pandemic. Tropical Cyclone Amphan on Wednesday made landfall in eastern India as a Category 2 storm. Nearly 3 million residents in India and Bangladesh, in the region just above the Bay of Bengal, evacuated as the storm swept through the region, which is extremely vulnerable to coastal flooding. And in March, EF-3 and EF-4 tornadoes with wind speeds up to 175 mph ripped through Tennessee, killing 25.

There are silver linings: COVID-19 is a public health emergency, so it hasn't affected the supply of typical hurricane resources such as generators, high-wheeled vehicles and sandbags, Connolly said.

The pandemic has encouraged people to stock up on necessities and taught people how to shelter in place, Taravella said.

And social distancing requirements might mean that fewer people will head to the Jersey Shore this summer, making an evacuation easier, Robinson said.

"The take-home point here is you evacuate," he added. "If anyone has any second thoughts, your exposure to the elements could be a lot more dangerous."

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