



# USA TODAY

## **Hurricane Florence remains 'life-threatening storm' despite weakening Wednesday night**

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Hurricane Florence was downgraded to Category 2 late Wednesday night but remained a clear danger to the East Coast with "life-threatening" storm surge and rainfall in the forecast.

As expected, Florence has slowed on its approach to North Carolina and South Carolina, where it's expected to make landfall late Thursday or early Friday, bombarding communities with torrential rain, high winds and deadly storm surge until Saturday.

Hurricane winds could linger for 24 hours or more, sweeping away trees and power lines while dumping 20 to 30 inches of rain in some coastal areas, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said. Isolated totals of 40 inches are possible.

Florence was driving sustained winds of 110 mph on Wednesday night and, earlier in the day, had created waves up to 83 feet, the hurricane center said, with the first tropical winds sweeping ashore before noon.

The approach of Florence has put more than 10 million people under storm watches and warnings across three states.

Along the coasts areas, more than 1 million people have been ordered to evacuate. Duke Energy warned that up to 75 percent of its 4 million customers in the Carolinas could lose power.

"This is not going to be a glancing blow," Federal Emergency Management Agency's Jeff Byard said. "This is going to be a Mike Tyson punch to the Carolina coast."

The storm, as of 11 p.m. EDT, was about 280 miles east-southeast of Wilmington, North Carolina, and 325 miles east-southeast of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, moving northwest at 17 mph.

The National Weather Service in Wilmington warned that Florence "will likely be the storm of a lifetime for portions of the Carolina coast."

The NHC stressed that tropical-storm force winds arriving Thursday morning would make outside preparations "difficult or dangerous."

"Preparations to protect life and property should be rushed to completion," the NHC bulletin warned.

After an earlier flirtation with up the coast toward Virginia, the southern turn brings Georgia into the path of the storm. Gov. Nathan Deal declared an emergency Wednesday for all 159 counties. But North Carolina remained a primary target, and Gov. Roy Cooper has ordered an unprecedented evacuation of the state's barrier islands.

The storm surge alone will flood tens of thousands of structures, Cooper said Wednesday.

"Every county and every person in North Carolina needs to stay alert and to take this storm seriously," Cooper said.

Not everyone was fleeing. In Wilmington, James Waters said he surfed Wednesday morning and was going to stay at his grandparents' house just across the water from the islands.

"My grandparents are staying, so I figured I would stay and help them," Waters said. "We've been through some hurricanes before. They say this one is supposed to be really bad."

President Donald Trump again warned people to heed storm warnings on Wednesday, saying Hurricane Florence "is going to be one of the biggest" to ever hit the East Coast or the United States as a whole.

There is "a big situation confronting us," Trump said during a White House reception for Congressional Medal of Honor recipients and their families. Trump said his administration is in close contact with state and emergency management officials.

"God bless everybody, and be careful," Trump said.

Outside Wilmington, less than two miles from the coast, the Trinity Grove nursing home has stocked extra food, medicine and water for some 100 residents, who will shelter in place.

The facility was built to withstand 140 mile per hours wind, says John Frye, the executive director.

Kay Torrens, 88, who has lived for 25 years in Trinity Grove with her 87-year-old husband, Leo, says she is heading to Virginia to stay with relatives, leaving the facility for the first time ever — and without Leo.

"He's in good hands. Why would I not trust it?" Torrens said. "I wouldn't leave him if it wasn't safe."

Weather Channel meteorologist Greg Postel said Florence has an unusual forecast track. "I've never seen anything like this," he said.

Ryan Maue, a meteorologist at weather.us who said Florence is forecast to dump about 10 trillion gallons of water on the Carolinas, called the forecast "bizarre" and said "the forecast after 72 hours is certainly a challenge ... and a nightmare."

Despite Florence's southern turn, people as far as Norfolk, Virginia, fled to higher ground. Wilma Johnson was on her way out of town Wednesday morning after her neighborhood that abuts the Elizabeth River was ordered evacuated by Gov. Ralph Northam. But she was having second thoughts.

"I'm not really afraid," she said. "I think I'd be much more comfortable at home."

The new track could make a tremendous difference to residents of the Washington, D.C., metro area and points north. Alan Reppert, a senior meteorologist for AccuWeather, said areas around Richmond, Virginia, could see 8 inches of rain. Washington, 100 miles to the north, might get only an inch.

Travel disruptions will be many. Nationwide, more than 575 flights have been canceled from Wednesday through Friday, flight-tracking service FlightAware reported.

Amtrak canceled some trains and modified service for others in the region and announced its Northeast Regional service will not run to Virginia destinations south of Washington from Wednesday through Sunday.

President Donald Trump lauded FEMA for its work during last year's devastating hurricane season and said authorities were ready for Florence.

"Hurricane Florence is looking even bigger than anticipated," Trump tweeted. "It will be arriving soon. FEMA, First Responders and Law Enforcement are supplied and ready. Be safe!"