

Hurricane Milton Now a Category 5, FL Orders Evacuations

BELLEAIR BEACH, Fla. (AP) – Milton rapidly strengthened into a Category 5 hurricane Monday in the Gulf of Mexico on a path toward Florida, threatening a dangerous storm surge in Tampa Bay, leading to evacuation orders and long gas lines, and lending more urgency to the cleanup from Hurricane Helene, which swamped the same stretch of coastline less than two weeks ago.

A hurricane warning was issued for parts of Mexico's Yucatan state, which expected to get sideswiped, and much of Florida's west coast was under hurricane and storm surge watches. Florida's Lake Okeechobee, which often floods during intense storms, was also under a hurricane watch.

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"This is the real deal here with Milton," Tampa Mayor Jane Castor said at a news conference. "If you want to take on Mother Nature, she wins 100% of the time."

The compact Milton intensified quickly Monday and was expected to become a large hurricane over the eastern Gulf. It had maximum sustained winds of 160 mph (257 kph), the National Hurricane Center said. The storm's center was about 130 miles (210 kilometers) west-northwest of Progreso, Mexico, and about 720 miles (1,160 kilometers) southwest of Tampa at midday Monday, moving east-southeast at 9 mph (15 kph).

Its center could come ashore Wednesday in the Tampa Bay area, and it could remain a hurricane as it moves across central Florida toward the Atlantic Ocean. That would largely spare

other states ravaged by Helene, which killed at least 230 people on its path from Florida to the Appalachian Mountains.

Forecasters warned of a possible 8- to 12-foot storm surge (2.4 to 3.6 meters) in Tampa Bay and said flash and river flooding could result from 5 to 10 inches (13 to 25 centimeters) of rain in mainland Florida and the Keys, with as much as 15 inches (38 centimeters) in places.

The Tampa Bay area is still rebounding from Helene and its powerful surge. Twelve people died, with the worst damage along a string of barrier islands from St. Petersburg to Clearwater.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said Monday that it was imperative that messes from Helene be cleared ahead of Milton's arrival so they don't become projectiles. More than 300 vehicles picked up debris Sunday but encountered a locked landfill gate when they tried to drop it off. State troopers used a rope tied to a pickup truck and busted it open, DeSantis said.

"We don't have time for bureaucracy and red tape," DeSantis said.

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Lifeguards in Pinellas County, on the peninsula that forms Tampa Bay, removed beach chairs and other items that could take flight in strong winds. Elsewhere, stoves, chairs, refrigerators and kitchen tables waited in heaps to be picked up.

Sarah Steslicki, who lives in Belleair Beach, said she was frustrated more debris hadn't been collected sooner.

"They've screwed around and haven't picked the debris up, and now they're scrambling to get it picked up," Steslicki said

Monday morning. "If this one does hit, it's going to be flying missiles. Stuff's going to be floating and flying in the air."

Hillsborough County, home to Tampa, ordered evacuations for areas adjacent to Tampa Bay and for all mobile and manufactured homes by Tuesday night.

"Yes, this stinks. We know that, and it comes on the heels of where a lot of us are still recovering from Hurricane Helene," Sheriff Chad Chronister said. "But if you safeguard your families, you will be alive."

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