

Residents Warned as Louisiana Braces for 'Catastrophic' Category 4 Hurricane Ida

Weather forecasters warned residents along the northern Gulf of Mexico coast to rush preparations Saturday in anticipation of an intensifying Hurricane Ida, which is expected to bring winds as high as 130 mph (209 kph), life-threatening storm surge and flooding rain when it slams ashore in Louisiana on Sunday.

Highways on the northern Gulf Coast saw steady traffic as people moved to get out of the storm's way. Trucks pulling saltwater fishing boats and campers were part of a steady stream of vehicles leaving the coast on Interstate 65 in south Alabama. Traffic snarls were reported on Interstate 10 heading west out of New Orleans.

Ida, a tropical depression two days earlier, was strengthening so quickly that New Orleans officials said there was no time to organize a mandatory evacuation of the city's 390,000 residents, a task that means coordinating with the state and neighboring locales so that inbound lanes on are highways can be converted to shunt traffic away from the city.

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell called a voluntary evacuation Friday and reiterated at a midday Saturday news conference that the time to safely leave was growing short. City officials also were preparing to announce facilities that would be opened to house anyone needing shelter after the storm. And they warned those who stayed to be prepared for prolonged power outages, with sweltering heat, in the days to come.

Ida was poised to strike Louisiana 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi and Louisiana

coasts, causing levee breaches and catastrophic flooding in New Orleans, which took years to recover. Ramsey Green, the city's top infrastructure official, stressed that the levee and drainage systems protecting the city now are much improved. "This is a very different, protected city than it was 16 years ago," Green said Saturday.

"That said, if we see 10 to 20 inches of rain over an abbreviated period of time, we will see flooding," he said.

Residents and tourists were among those leaving Saturday.

"We were willing to wait it out but the hotel said we had to leave," said visitor Lays Lafaurie of Fort Worth, Texas, waiting in a rental car line at the city's airport. "They said we had to leave by 7 tomorrow morning. But if we'd waited that long there wouldn't have been any cars left."

Ida's potential threats extended well beyond New Orleans.

Meteorologist Steve Bowen, head of global catastrophe insight at the risk and consulting firm Aon, said the area that was about to get hit is especially vulnerable, with large swaths of industries that could cause environmental damages as well as homes that still have tarps instead of roofs from multiple storms in 2020.

"It's not just the coastal impact. It's not just New Orleans," Bowen said. "We're certainly looking at potential losses well into the billions."

Phillips 66 said it was shutting down operations at its refinery in Belle Chasse, Louisiana, "based on the projected path of the storm and the potential for storm surge."

Many gas stations in New Orleans and its suburbs were out of gas, and the few still open had lines more than a dozen cars deep and a wait time of nearly an hour. {eo}

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