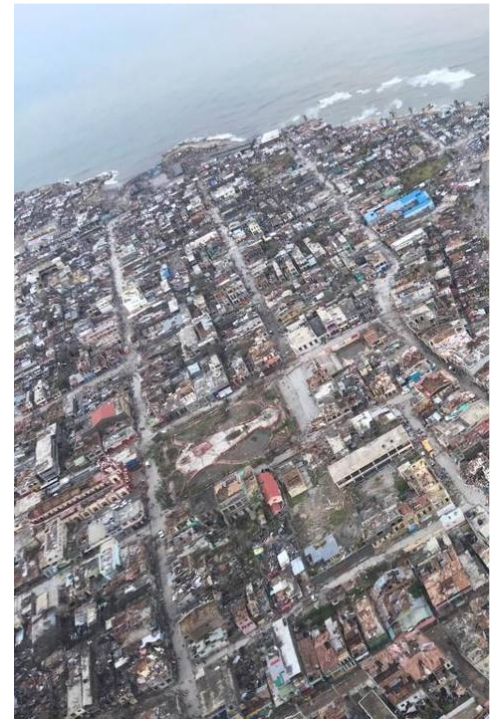
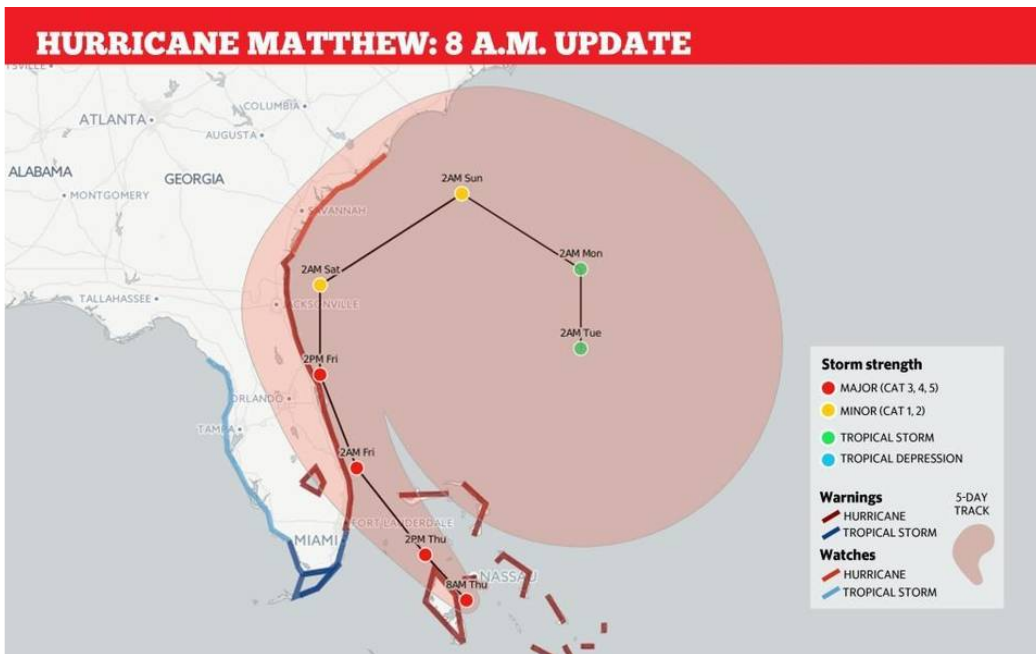


Florida feeling the squalls of Hurricane Matthew



BY JULIE K. BROWN
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The state of Florida is bracing for a direct hit from Hurricane Matthew, which has already claimed 26 lives in the Caribbean and is the fiercest storm to hit the state in more than a decade.

Matthew is gunning itself closer and closer to Florida, as the state geared up Thursday for massive evacuations of the coast, from Broward County north to the Georgia state line.

Gov. Rick Scott urged residents, particularly those in low-lying evacuation zones, to leave and find shelter inland or risk serious injury and even death.

“Unfortunately this is going to kill people,” Scott said at a morning press conference. Some areas will get winds up to 150 mph, and the state is expecting “catastrophic” damage, he said.

From Westchester to Daytona Beach, lines formed around gas pumps and in supermarkets, windows were boarded up and shelters were readied. Miami-Dade and Broward counties canceled schools for the rest of the week and for the first time, Port Miami sealed its new \$1.1 billion tunnel. In South Florida, drawbridges began locking down and national parks battened down. Florida Power & Light positioned teams anticipating major outages and thousands of National Guard troops were standing ready across the state.

At 11 a.m. the hurricane was upgraded to a Category 4 storm, steering itself at 30 mph south of Nassau. It’s winds were howling at 125 mph, according to the National Hurricane Center. On the forecast track, the eye of Matthew should pass near Andros Island and New Providence in the northwestern Bahamas during the next few hours, Grand Bahama Island late Thursday, and move close to the east coast of Florida overnight, the Hurricane Center said.

The eye of the storm was moving toward the northwest between Andros Island and Nassau in the Bahamas. This general motion is expected to continue Thursday with a turn toward the north-northwest tonight or early Friday. On the forecast track, Matthew should cross the northwestern Bahamas later today and move close to or over the east coast of the Florida peninsula Friday night.



Hurricane Matthew slams Nassau, Bahamas

This video, posted to Instagram, shows Hurricane Matthew moving through Nassau, Bahamas.

mr_curtisy via Instagram

More than 1.5 million Floridians live in either mandatory or voluntary evacuation zones. Mandatory evacuations have been ordered along the coast of Brevard and Palm Beach counties, and voluntary evacuations in Broward County. In Miami-Dade, state officials recommended that people who live in mobile home parks also move to safer shelter.

Scott said 58 shelters were open across the state Thursday, with another 84 scheduled to open. In Broward County on Thursday morning, 1,300 people were in shelters, with the two shelters designated for those with special needs already full, county officials said.

"We don't know where this storm is going," the governor said in urging evacuations.

Here are the latest developments:

- Matthew is expected to make landfall or near landfall Thursday night, somewhere between West Palm Beach and Cape Canaveral.
- The hurricane is expected to intensify to a Category 4, with winds at 140 mph.
- Hurricane-force winds are expected in Palm Beach, which has ordered mandatory evacuations along the coastline.
- Shelters are open in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade, and they are filling up.
- Miami-Dade airport is open, but many flights are canceled. Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood airport closed at 10:30 a.m. The ports are also closed.

On Thursday, hundreds of people poured into South Florida shelters. In Fort Lauderdale, they came toting suitcases, blankets and pillows. Some were homeless with no other place to go, others living in homes that didn't have the right protections.

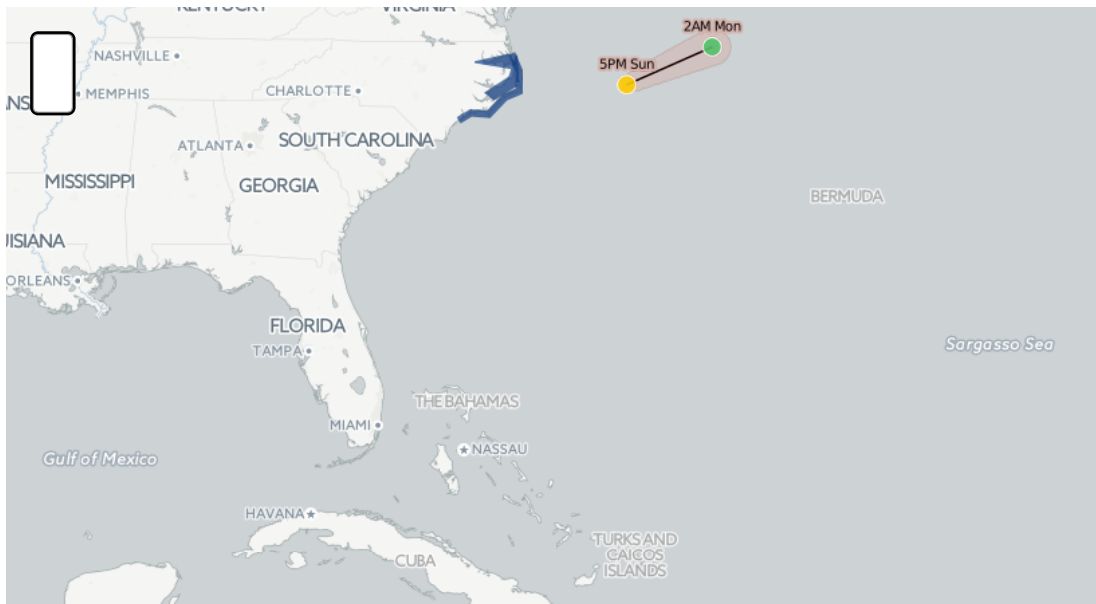
"I am homeless. There is no way I can ride out a Category 3 or 4 outside," said Ken Roberts, 59, a U.S. Army veteran who came to Fort Lauderdale from Asheville, NC last year. "I would not make it."

PHOTOS: Hurricane Matthew hits Haiti

With tropical-storm-force winds extend outward up to 160 miles, South Florida — which is 185 miles from Nassau — will begin to feel Matthew's gusts over the next couple of hours. The Weather Channel reported sustained winds of 119 mph in George Town, Nassau reported sustained winds of 50 mph with a wind gust of mph, the hurricane service said.

11 a.m. Hurricane Matthew update

Movement: N at 6 mph **Max winds:** 60 mph **Wind gusts:** 70 mph



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Sources: NOAA and Weather Underground

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The storm is expected to dump as much as 15 inches of rain in the Bahamas, and produce storm surges of up to as 15 feet with "life-threatening" surf and rip currents, the hurricane center said.

At least 26 lives have already been claimed by the storm, which whipped Cuba and Haiti with high winds and torrential rains on Tuesday, pummeling towns and destroying livestock, crops and homes. Some 21,000 people fled to shelters.

The storm was moving toward the northwest at 12 mph, and is expected to roll up Florida's coast toward Georgia and South Carolina. Some two million people in the three states have been advised to evacuate.

READ MORE: What to expect as hurricanes sweeps by South Florida

Hurricane warnings are in effect north of Golden Beach in Miami-Dade all the way to Altamaha Sound in Georgia. A hurricane warning is also in effect on Lake Okeechobee. Gov. Rick Scott assured residents that the lake and its aging dike would be able to withstand the heavy rain and winds expected to pummel Palm Beach County.

Scott asked President Barack Obama to declare a pre-landfall emergency, activate 1,000 more National Guard members to join the 1,500 already positioned in the state. Tolls were already suspended in the affected areas, including the entire Florida Turnpike, Alligator Alley, Central Florida Expressway Authority and the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority.

READ MORE: Here's what's closed and canceled

People were already beginning to fill shelters in Fort Lauderdale by Thursday morning, as other shelters in the region opened their doors to both residents and, in some cases, their pets. Schools and businesses were shuttered throughout South Florida.

Bryan Koon, director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management, stressed "calm and urgency" for officials coordinating preparation and response efforts across the state. He told officials at the State Emergency Operations Center to make sure all measures were in place. Koon also said they should be ready for when the storm passes to begin damage assessments, debris removal and power restoration.

The outermost bands of the storm will start to dump sustained rain on Miami-Dade and Broward counties by about lunchtime Thursday. With these bands come lightning and increased risk of tornadoes. Winds will pick up by the afternoon, with tropical storm force speeds blowing in throughout the night, the National Weather Service said.



Hurricane Matthew barrels toward Florida

Hurricane Matthew, the fiercest storm to hit South Florida in more than a decade, slogged its way across the Bahamas Thursday morning and began its steady and strengthening trek toward the state's coastline.

NOAA

When it comes closest to South Florida on Thursday night, it is forecast to be producing winds of 130 mph, a low-end Category 4 storm that can cause "catastrophic" damage, according to the hurricane center.

Communities along the mainland coast and on the barrier islands will bear the brunt of the wind more than inland areas, according to the National Weather Service.

Hurricane force winds, in excess of 75 mph, were expected in Palm Beach County, where a direct hit is possible, forecasters said.

Inspectors have been watching Lake Okeechobee's troubled dike and water managers are draining canals out to sea to try to lessen flooding threats from the hurricane. The swollen lake's water level is already higher than the peak range officials try to maintain. The heavy rainfall associated with Matthew could risk the stability of the 30-foot-tall mound of rock, shell and sand surrounding the lake.

Miami Herald staff writers Audra D.S. Burch and Jacqueline Charles contributed to this report.



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