

KATE SMACKS THE GULF COAST

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Hitting the Panhandle where it already has been hurt so badly this year, deadly Hurricane Kate roared ashore Thursday near Mexico Beach and keep on churning.

This time Tallahassee didn't escape.

"It's a mess – it really is. The town is a wreck." Said Tallahassee Police Department spokesman Scott Hunt.

The area's third major storm in three months roused about 100,000 residents from their Gulf Coast homes, and shook the daylights out of the storm-weary ones who stayed.

It led to the death of two Panhandle residents, in addition to as many as 10 people in Cuba and Key West it killed earlier in the week.

The storm poured up to 10 inches of rain all over North Florida. It sent winds screaming faster than 100 mph and gave birth to tornadoes in Tallahassee, Panama City and Calhoun County.

It ate 4-foot chunks out of coastal U.S. 98, undoing in minutes what state workers have been repairing for two months.

It closed roads, bridges and schools. It pushed over trees, killed power all along the Gulf Coast and as far east as Madison County, and left 90 percent of Tallahassee's city-electric officials called it the worst blackout in 30 years and said it might take 10 days to two weeks to fully restore power.

It apparently punished Franklin County worst of all, extensively damaging its courthouse and reportedly overturning a water tower.

It blew out windows and busted up roofs – including one on a Tallahassee nursing home.

Law-enforcement officials urged residents to stay put today: Live power lines are down all over the area and pose a hazard.

"Cleanup is going to be horrendous," Hunt said. State officials said they expected the worst of the storm to be over by this morning. At 11:00PM, a weather forecaster said, Kate was downgraded to a tropical storm.

"We don't know what the damage is. We are fearful of the worst," said Jon Peck, spokesman for the Florida Division of Emergency Management.

Details on the two deaths attributed to the storm were sketchy Thursday night.

One victim was an 81-year-old woman, evacuated from Panama City to a hotel in Chipley, who suffered a heart attack Wednesday night, said Joy McIlwain, state emergency-management spokeswoman. The woman's name was not available.

The other was an unidentified Jackson County man who died Thursday night, officials said, after he was pinned under a tree.

Earlier in the day, Governor Bob Graham said he expected Kate to inflict heavy wind damage on inland counties.

"Elena brushed us and Juan brushed us and Gloria scared us," Graham said, "and now it looks like Kate will be the first blow on the Florida coast."

It was some blow.

The storm made landfall about 5 p.m., said Dr Neil Frank, director of the National Hurricane Center in coral Gables. It brought 5 to 10 inches of rain and tides 8 to 12 feet above normal.

It came ashore near Mexico Beach, more than 100 miles south-west of Tallahassee. But it apparently took its heaviest toll on one county really wouldn't afford it: Franklin.

Winds exceeding 110 mph poured through Apalachicola, reportedly overturning a water tower and causing extensive damage to buildings, businesses and roads, authorities said.

The John Gorrie Bridge and St George Island Causeway were awash with seawater.

Apalachicola Police Chief Lawrence Faircloth was injured when a tree fell on his car, said acting civil defense chief Lee Rivers. Faircloth's injuries were not considered serious, however.

The county courthouse suffered extensive damage, with windows broken, offices flooded and the roof damaged. Trailers were reportedly thrown into a store, and seafood businesses received extensive damage. A boat reportedly crashed into one seafood plant.

No damage figures were immediately available.

"Three storms in a row," Rivers said in Apalachicola early in the day. "This is a small community on a limited budget, but before the day is over we'll lose all the roads we lost before."

Two hours of wave action destroyed all repairs made to U.S. 98 near Carrabelle by state road-department workers over the past weeks, said Milton Houseman, retired police chief of Apalachicola. The road had been chewed up by Hurricane Elena in September.

In Tallahassee, weather got much wilder as the night went on.

By 9:00PM, the center of the storm was 30 miles northwest of town and expected to continue on its north-northeast path at 15 mph.

Sustained winds hit 60 mph, and gusts reached 86. Tornado sightings were confirmed on Stone Road, Mission Road, Hartsfield Road and State Road 20.

Power lines were down and trees were toppled all over town. One woman was badly injured when a tree fell on her car, and two police officers were trapped in their cars, authorities said.

About 90 percent of city-utility customers were without power at 9:00PM. And they were destined to stay that way: City crews were being pulled off the streets until 7:00AM, for their own safety.

The winds blew the roof off the Miracle Hill Nursing & Convalescent Home on Abraham Street, said state spokeswoman McIlwain, but the patients were removed without injury.

The winds also damaged the roofs on at least two businesses, the Howard Johnson's and Pizza Hut restaurants on West Tennessee Street.

Businesses faced another hazard: looting. Unconfirmed reports to the police said looters were spotted at the Plaza 10 shopping center, off Capital Circle.

On Belleau Wood Road in Betton Hills, a large oak tree fell through a roof and trapped a woman and two children. Neighbors heard their screams, and four Leon County Sheriff's Deputies eventually rescued them. No further details were available.

Three Tallahassee police officers were trapped in their cars as high winds dropped trees all around them, authorities said. Other details were not immediately available, but the officers were not hurt, said police spokesman Scott Hunt.

A woman was seriously injured in a separate accident when a tree fell on her car.

One person was injured in an accident at Old Bainbridge Road and Tharpe Street. Downed trees blocked traffic at Miccosukee and Martin roads, and on Medical Drive. No major damage was reported.

The city's motels and evacuation centers were full. Parkwood Baptist Church had 165 people by 7:15PM. First Baptist was full as well, and two more American Red Cross shelters had been opened, at Seminole Baptist Church and Forest Heights Church.

In downtown Panama City, the roof of the federal building was blown away, either by the hurricane or by a tornado reported in the area about 6:00PM, said Bay County Manager Al Cape.

Roger Hagins, Washington County civil-defense director, said two twisters were reported there, and one did about \$10,000 damage to an unspecified building.

Cape said there were reports of damage on Panama City Beach, but no details were available. The Bay County command post was operating on emergency generators, and a tenuous link of communication was being maintained by amateur radio from Apalachicola to the rest of the world.

Daylight is going to solve a lot of things for us," said Larry Davis, head of civil defense for Bay County, "but the people in the shelter are going to want to go home. It's going to be hard to keep people in the shelters when the skies are clear, but we're going to err on the side of safety."

He said the decision to reopen bridges to Panama City Beach would be made today. State crews were inspecting the bridges late Thursday night. His biggest fear, he said, was downed power lines.

Gulf Power spokesman said nearly 14,000 to 16,000 people were without power in Bay County alone.

In Wakulla County, major roads were littered with trees and power lines, Sheriff David Harvey reported.

Winds toppled the steeple of the First Baptist Church in Crawfordville, he said, and the portable building where the county commissioners meets was damaged.

He said residents had reported sighting tornadoes.

Conditions in Wakulla were "rapidly deteriorating" by dinner time, said Civil Defense Director Eric Hindle. "Everyone is moving out."

He said he'd had no time to make damage assessments: "We've been too busy."

"Things are getting pretty bad here," Harvey said.

At 6:00PM, Harvey reported "water all over Shell Point." Winds there were blowing at 100 mph, he said, and "even those people who were hanging on are leaving now."

The electricity was beginning to die all over the county, said Harvey, and the jail was operating off an emergency generator.

Harvey said everyone in the county had been evacuated, and he was even pulling back some of his own deputies because the situation had gotten so bad.

The outlook for the area's beaches was grim, a state official said.

"I think the effect of a direct hit could be substantial," Robert Dean, director of the state Division of Beaches and Shores, said earlier in the day. "The beaches are still in a vulnerable state from Hurricane Elena and Tropical Storm Juan. They're not in a good position to absorb the impact of Kate."

Despite Kate's intensity, not everyone along the coast fled as the storm approached. Tried of this hurricane-heavy season, some residents figured they wouldn't let the weather push them around any more.

"The complacency is there," Franklin County Commissioner Brent Mabrey said at noon. "Quite a bit more people didn't evacuate this time."

Nine people huddled Thursday afternoon in one ground-level, bayside home on isolated Dog Island off Franklin County.

"We're just watching it blow," Forrest Granger said in a radio telephone interview from the island. "We were going to leave, but it's too rough now."

By early in the day, the Florida Highway Patrol blocked off roads in coastal areas to all but emergency traffic. About 300 National Guard members called out by Graham on Wednesday, when he declared a state of emergency, were helping. But most in the 73-person outpost in Apalachicola were retreating as Kate whirled nearer.

Peck, the state emergency-management spokesman, said an estimated 75,000 – 100,000 people had been evacuated from the Panhandle by midday, and 15,000 were in shelters. Others were driving into Georgia or Alabama in search of shelter.

At 4:00PM Graham ordered the evacuation of coastal and low-lying areas of Jefferson and Taylor counties.

Capt. Larry Clayton of the National guard said he thought all the low-lying areas had been cleared. The problem, he noted, will be afterward, waiting for downed power lines and other hazards to be cleared.

"That's really the big problem, keeping people out who've got their entire life on the bay," Clayton said. "It's hard to tell a man he can't check on his own belongings."

Kate's winds blew at 100 mph after a long trek through the Gulf of Mexico from Cuba, where the storm left severe crop damage and up to 10 dead.

Forecasters said Kate was bringing rainfall of five to 10 inches and tides 8 to 12 feet above normal.

Hurricane warnings were discontinued west of Pensacola late Thursday morning but remained in effect from Pensacola east to St Marks, on the coast south of Tallahassee.

"Even though residents of the inland counties will not be subjected to the full force of Hurricane Kate as it crosses onto land, they still face extreme danger from extensive flooding, gale-force winds and possibly even tornadoes," Graham said.

State Rep. Ron Johnson, D Panama City, who is Bay County's civil-defense director, said 25,000 people were evacuated from Panama City Beach and low-lying areas throughout Bay County. About 4,000 of them were in 13 shelters in the county.

Downtown businesses were closing, as merchants were taping and boarding their windows and hauling some goods away in pickup trucks. Main roads already were flooding.

In a statement, Bay Sheriff Lavelle Pitts warned residents to stay inside.

"We're really talking about your lives. We're asking you to use your heads," he said.

The Gulf County Sheriff's Department ordered liquor and beer sales halted, trying to prevent "hurricane parties" by people who refused to leave.

Kate stalled for several hours in the early morning while its center reorganized, as if it were "sensing the coastline," forecaster Bob Case said. The late-season storm also lost some strength as it moved over cooler waters.

Evacuations continued apace despite Wednesday's nighttime lull, officials said.

"We did it over a period of time, so there wasn't a big concentration of people," said Mike Mitchell, a Civil Defense official in Fort Walton Beach. "We are well-trained in hurricanes after this season. We also learned you don't reach a conclusion or breathe a sign of relief prematurely."

By midday, about 5,500 of the 8,400 residents of Franklin County, built around oyster-rich Apalachicola Bay, had fled. The bridge over the bay was closed at late morning.

Authorities said some people were refusing to leave, either because they were tired of evacuating or were feeling defiant after enduring Hurricane Elena, which devastated the local bay-based economy Labor Day weekend.

Coastal residents evacuated twice when Hurricane Elena approached Florida in September before hitting Mississippi, and again last month as Hurricane Juan lingered off the Louisiana coast before veering in over Alabama.

“They’re punchy from getting up and leaving,” explained Rivers. “But you’ve got to understand about 90 percent of Franklin County depends on this bay for a living and the bay was wiped out with Elena.”

This storm could wipe out the newly spawned oysters being counted upon to replenish the \$6.5 million crop, nearly 10 percent of the nation’s supply, ruined by Elena.

“People are really sad about it. They grew up making their heritage with the seafood,” said William Whittington, 27, clerk and handyman at the Rainbow Marina Motel. “A lot of them have had to take inland jobs that they don’t like..”

But officials said most residents heeded the warnings, and many of the tiny coastal towns between here and Pensacola were ghostly quiet.

A 15-mile stretch of U.S. 98, where repairs necessitated by Elena were recently completed, was closed to all but emergency traffic.

Thousands of people were evacuated Wednesday from coastal regions of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi before hurricane warnings were discontinued there.

Cuban news media reported four to 10 dead and “grave” damage to sugar cane, bananas and other crops after Kate’s 16 hour assault Tuesday. The hurricane bypassed Key West, the southern Most U.S. city, but its outer winds knocked out power and destroyed several houseboats.

This story was compiled from reports by Democrat staff writers Bruce Mastron, Karen Olson, Mike Cassidy, Kirk Spitzer, Bill Cotterell, R C Morgan-Wilde, Soneni Brant, Penny Chang, Browing Brooks and Rangelique Moultrie, and by the Associated Press.