

10 tornadoes confirmed in Ga., including one with winds topping 160 mph

February 22 2009, Liz Fabian, The Macon Telegraph, Ga.

Ten tornadoes, one packing winds of more than 160 mph, touched down in parts of Georgia on Wednesday, the National Weather Service said Friday.

The storms caused an estimated \$25 million in insured losses, said John W. Oxendine, the state's insurance commissioner.

"I spent some time surveying damage and talking to residents in Jasper, Putnam and Hancock Counties" on Friday, Oxendine said in statement. "I believe claims will easily reach \$25 million. Actual losses are much higher when you consider things like infrastructure damage and uninsured losses."

In Hancock County, 60-year-old Johnny Frank Baker was killed when his mobile home was shredded in the twister that also destroyed Hickory Grove Missionary Baptist Church across the street. His daughter, Lakesia Baker, and her two children were hurt as the storm blew them across the street, where deputies found them in the rubble.

Baker was in stable condition at St. Joseph's Hospital in Atlanta on Friday recovering from serious injuries, relatives at the hospital said. Her young son, Jermaine, who was transported to Atlanta's Egleston Children's Hospital with injuries, has been released. Her daughter sustained less serious injuries.

Severe storms that raked across the state unleashed twisters across 13

counties, ranging in strength from EF-0 at Robins Air Force Base to an EF-4 with winds of up to 166 mph in Wilkes County, according to a preliminary report from the weather service.

Gov. Sonny Perdue issued an executive order Friday declaring a state of emergency in Hancock and three other Georgia counties affected by severe weather that passed through the state late Wednesday, injuring 22 others.

"We extend our thoughts and prayers to the family of the deceased and to those that were hurt. In addition to the human toll, the storms left trees downed, houses damaged and roads blocked across Georgia," Perdue said in a statement. "As a result, state resources have been requested and are being made available to assist local governments in these counties with cleanup efforts. As always, we will continue to actively work with local officials to support them."

The emergency areas also include Jasper, Thomas and Warren counties.

The first EF-0 twister was reported in Taylor County on Tommy Purvis Jr. Road about 5:45 p.m. One home was damaged, a mobile home was shifted off its foundation and trees crashed down in the tornado, which touched down intermittently over three to four miles with a 100-foot-wide path and winds of 70 mph.

At 6:25 p.m., a civilian worker at Robins Air Force Base was hit by debris as a base weather observer sighted the twister off one of the runways. The minimal tornado had winds of 70 mph and tracked just 50 feet into the woods and did not do any damage.

Shortly before 7 p.m., an EF-1 tornado hit U.S. 441 in Oconee County near Tappin Spur Road. The twister's 90-mph winds downed numerous trees and closed the highway. Traveling over five miles with a width of

300 yards, the tornado damaged roofs of several homes, moved a mobile home off its foundation and brought down hundreds of trees at the Georgia Nature Center. Two tent areas were destroyed, and solar panels were damaged at the center.

The state's most powerful tornado touched down at 7:10 p.m. in Wilkes County, north of Augusta, and tracked 16 miles, with a half-mile path of destruction. The twister is blamed for demolishing a cinder block home and blowing debris a half-mile away. A commercial chicken house was destroyed, a 2-ton truck was moved 60 feet, 19 outbuildings were destroyed and 15 houses sustained moderate to major damage.

About 7:15, Robert Parham had a few customers in his Westside Drive nightclub on Glenwood Spring Road when an EF-1 tornado touched down with 110 mph winds. Parham jumped under the bar while the patrons sought shelter under pool tables as the cinder blocks tore apart and the roof went flying away.

The Putnam County Sheriff's Office reported rescuing two people from Parham's house next door to the club. One woman was injured by flying debris, said Putnam County Sheriff Howard Sills.

The tornado traveled five miles and destroyed the Headhunter Motor Club drag strip off U.S. 441. The twister, which had a three-quarter-of-a-mile-wide path, also toppled large power transmission lines near the Walmart on Gray Highway.

By 7:20 p.m., the first of two EF-1 tornadoes hit Jasper County and traveled three miles, leaving a quarter-mile-wide path. The winds of 100 mph damaged several buildings along Ga. 18 beginning in the Smithboro community, where one home was destroyed along with a small mill warehouse. Trees and power lines were also downed.

At 8 p.m., another EF-1 tornado touched down nine miles northwest of Shady Dale near Shepard Road. It continued seven miles with a quarter-mile-wide track that downed more than 100 trees and did major damage to a small cottage in the northeast part of Jasper County and damaged five homes.

An EF-1 tornado hit Newton County's King Bostwick Road and tracked two miles with a 200-yard-wide path. Twenty to 30 homes sustained extensive damage in a heavily wooded subdivision where trees crashed down on nearly every house in the 100 mph winds.

At 8:30 p.m., an EF-2 tornado packing winds of 120 mph touched down just inside the Meriwether County line and tracked into Coweta and Spalding counties. Four homes were destroyed and 40 were damaged over a 20-mile area. A horse was killed by flying debris near U.S. 27A.

In Hancock County, David Hill had fallen asleep watching a storm report on television when an EF-3 tornado hit with winds of 140 mph about 10:40 p.m. That tornado tracked a total of eight miles and left a path of destruction about 500 yards wide. Three other mobile homes were destroyed in the area.

Staff writer Ashley Tusan Joyner contributed information to this report.

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Citation: 10 tornadoes confirmed in Ga., including one with winds topping 160 mph (2009, February 22) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-02-tornadoes-ga-topping-mph.html>

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