

Hundreds of thousands flee US coast ahead of Hurricane Laura

August 26 2020, by John Mone and Stacey Plaisance



People wait in front of the Galveston Housing Authority offices to board charter busses that will evacuate them from Galveston Island to Austin in anticipation of impact from Hurricane Laura, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston. (Mark Mulligan/Houston Chronicle via AP)

In the largest U.S. evacuation of the pandemic, more than half a million

people were ordered to flee the Gulf Coast on Tuesday as Laura strengthened into a hurricane that forecasters said could slam Texas and Louisiana with ferocious winds, heavy flooding and the power to push seawater miles inland.

More than 385,000 residents were told to flee the Texas cities of Beaumont, Galveston and Port Arthur, and another 200,000 were ordered to leave low-lying Calcasieu Parish in southwestern Louisiana, where forecasters said as much as 13 feet (4 meters) of storm surge topped by waves could submerge whole communities.

Forecasters Tuesday night expected the storm to increase in strength by 33%, from 90 mph (144 kmh) to 120 mph (193 kmh) in just 24 hours. They project Laura to strike the coast as a major Category 3 hurricane. The strengthening may slow or stop just before landfall, forecasters said.

"The waters are warm enough everywhere there to support a [major hurricane](#), Category 3 or even higher. The waters are very warm where the storm is now and will be for the entire path up until the Gulf Coast," National Hurricane Center Deputy Director Ed Rappaport said.

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said Laura is shaping up to look a lot like Hurricane Rita did 15 years ago when it ravaged southwest Louisiana.

"We're going to have significant flooding in places that don't normally see it," he said.



Evacuees walk to board buses Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas. The evacuees are being taken to Austin, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

Ocean water was expected to push onto land along more than 450 miles (724 kilometers) of coast from Texas to Mississippi. Hurricane warnings were issued from San Luis Pass, Texas, to Intracoastal City, Louisiana, and [storm surge](#) warnings from the Port Arthur, Texas, flood protection system to the mouth of the Mississippi River.

The evacuations could get even bigger if the storm's track veers to the east or west, said Craig Fugate, the former head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Fearing that people would not evacuate in time, Edwards said those in southwest Louisiana need to be where they intend to ride out Laura by noon Wednesday, when the state will start feeling the storm's effects.

Officials urged people to stay with relatives or in hotel rooms to avoid spreading the virus that causes COVID-19. Buses were stocked with protective equipment and disinfectant, and they would carry fewer passengers to keep people apart, Texas officials said.



Houston SPCA staff members Linnea Wood, foreground, and Calista Stover carry pets from the Galveston Island Humane Society, onto a Wings of Rescue plane headed to Dallas/Fort Worth Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Houston, as Hurricane Laura threatens the Texas coast. (Steve Gonzales/Houston Chronicle via AP)

Whitney Frazier, 29, of Beaumont spent Tuesday morning trying to get transportation to a [high school](#) where she could board a bus to leave the area.

"Especially with everything with COVID going on already on top of a mandatory evacuation, it's very stressful," Frazier said.

The storm also imperiled a center of the U.S. energy industry. The government said 84% of Gulf oil production and an estimated 61% of natural gas production were shut down. Nearly 300 platforms have been evacuated.

While oil prices often spike before a major storm as production slows, consumers are unlikely to see big price changes because the pandemic decimated demand for fuel.

As of Tuesday evening, Laura was 435 miles (700 kilometers) southeast of Lake Charles, Louisiana, traveling west-northwest at 17 mph (28 kmh). Its peak winds were 85 mph (140 kph).



Evacuees walk to board buses Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas. The evacuees are being taken to Austin, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

Laura passed Cuba after killing nearly two dozen people on the island of Hispaniola, including 20 in Haiti and three in the Dominican Republic, where it knocked out power and caused intense flooding. The deaths reportedly included a 10-year-old girl whose home was hit by a tree and a mother and young son crushed by a collapsing wall.

As much as 15 inches (38 centimeters) of rain could fall in some parts of Louisiana, said Donald Jones, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

At Grand Isle, Louisiana, Nicole Fantiny said she planned to ride out the hurricane on the barrier island along with a few dozen other people.

"It could still change, but we keep on hoping and praying that it keeps on going further west like it's doing," said Fantiny, who manages a restaurant.



Evacuees, from right to left, Tommie McNeil, Elisabeth Pelham, Nota Norris, and a woman who did not want to be identified, wait to board a bus as they evacuate, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas. The evacuees are being taken to Austin, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

In Galveston and Port Arthur, Texas, mandatory evacuation orders went into effect shortly before daybreak Tuesday. "If you decide to stay, you're staying on your own," Port Arthur Mayor Thurman Bartie said.

Shelters opened with cots set farther apart to curb coronavirus infections. People planning to enter shelters were told to bring just one bag of personal belongings each, and a mask to reduce the spread of coronavirus.

"Hopefully it's not that threatening to people, to lives, because people are hesitant to go anywhere due to COVID," Robert Duffy said as he placed sandbags around his home in Morgan City, Louisiana. "Nobody wants to sleep on a gym floor with 200 other people. It's kind of hard to do social distancing."

Officials in Houston asked residents to prepare supplies in case they lose power for a few days or need to evacuate homes along the coast. Some in the area are still recovering from Hurricane Harvey three years ago.



CORRECTS SPELLING OF FIRST NAME TO ELISABETH INSTEAD OF ELIZABETH - Elisabeth Pelham waits to board a bus to evacuate, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas. The evacuees are being taken to Austin, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Miguel Andrade secures a strap over a giant crab atop Gaido's Seafood Restaurant, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. The crab has been on display since 1960. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Gov. Greg Abbott talks about Hurricane Laura at the alternate State Operations Center at the Doubletree Hotel in Austin, Texas, on Tuesday August 25, 2020. (Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP)



Workers board up windows at the Galvez Hotel & Spa Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Southwest Louisiana residents wait for buses at Burton Coliseum in Lake Charles, La. to be evacuated to a shelter in Alexandria, La., Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020. (Rick Hickman/American Press via AP)



Miguel Andrade Jr. carries plywood to board up the windows at Rudy and Paco Restaurant and Bar in downtown Galveston, Tuesday, Aug 25, 2020. Local businesses continued to make preparations for Hurricane Laura's arrival along the gulf coast. (Stuart Villanueva/The Galveston County Daily News via AP)



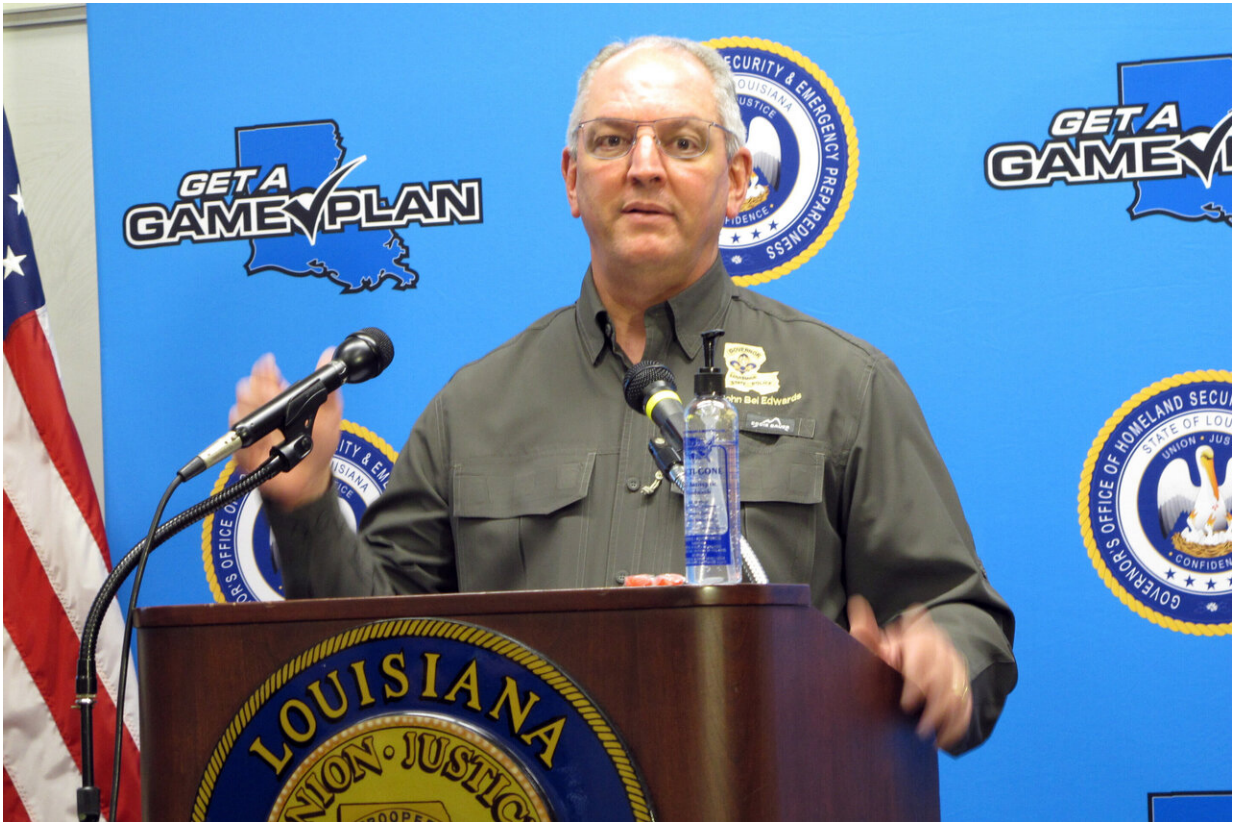
Issac Alvarado boards up windows of coastal decor store Bayside Chic, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Tiara Walker holds her dog, Buece, as she waits with her family to board a bus to evacuate Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston, Texas. The evacuees are being taken to Austin, Texas, as Hurricane Laura heads toward the Gulf Coast. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



A United State Postal Service Employee covers a mailbox with plastic wrap after removing the last mail from it as the island prepares for possible impact from Hurricane Laura, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Galveston. The plastic wrap signals that the final mail has been cleared from the box and prevents people from placing more mail inside in case of flooding. (Mark Mulligan/Houston Chronicle via AP)



Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards talks about the expected impact of Hurricane Laura, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in Baton Rouge, La. (AP Photo/Melinda Deslatte)



Osman Antunez cuts plywood to cover the windows at Stonewater, Inc. Disaster Relief on Post Office Street in downtown Galveston Tuesday, Aug 25, 2020. Local businesses continued to make preparations for Hurricane Laura's arrival along the gulf coast. (Stuart Villanueva/The Galveston County Daily News via AP)



Municipal workers fill sandbags for residents in advance of Hurricane Laura in Abbeville, La., Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)



Municipal workers fill sandbags for the elderly and those with disabilities ahead of Hurricane Laura in Crowley, La., Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

Laura's arrival comes just days before the Aug. 29 anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, which breached the levees in New Orleans, flattened much of the Mississippi coast and killed as many as 1,800 people in 2005. Less than a month later, Hurricane Rita struck southwest Louisiana as a Category 3 storm.

Laura wasn't much of a concern for Kerry Joe Richard of Stephenville, Louisiana. As the storm approached, he was angling for catfish from a small dock overlooking the bayou that's behind his elevated wood-frame home.

"The only thing I'm worried about is if the fish quit biting," he said.

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