

Laura gains strength, could bring 'unsurvivable' storm surge

August 26 2020, by Melinda Deslatte, Jeff Martin and Stacey Plaisance



Port Arthur firefighters check the temperatures of people arriving at the civic center where evacuation buses wait, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, in Port Arthur, Texas. Hurricane Laura is expected to make landfall in the area Wednesday night or early Thursday. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

Laura strengthened Wednesday into a menacing Category 4 hurricane, raising fears of a 20-foot storm surge that forecasters said would be

"unsurvivable" and capable of sinking entire communities. Authorities implored coastal residents of Texas and Louisiana to evacuate and worried that not enough had fled.

The storm grew nearly 70% in power in just 24 hours to a size the National Hurricane Center called "extremely dangerous." Drawing energy from the warm Gulf of Mexico waters, the system was on track to arrive late Wednesday or early Thursday as the most powerful hurricane to strike the U.S. so far this year.

"It looks like it's in full beast mode," said University of Miami hurricane researcher Brian McNoldy. "Which is not what you want to see if you're in its way."

One major Louisiana highway already had standing water as Laura's outer bands moved ashore with tropical storm-force winds. Thousands of sandbags lined roadways in tiny Lafitte, and winds picked up as shoppers rushed into a grocery store in low-lying Delcambre. Trent Savoie, 31, said he was staying put.

"With four kids and 100 farm animals, it's just hard to move out," he said.

With time running short, both Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards fretted that the dire predictions were not resonating despite authorities putting more than 500,000 coastal residents under mandatory evacuation orders. In Lake Charles, Louisiana, National Guard members drove school buses around neighborhoods, offering to pick up families. Just across the state line in Port Arthur, Texas, stragglers boarding buses were few and far between.



Victoria Nelson with her children Autum Nelson, 2, Shawn Nelson, 7, and Asia Nelson, 6, line up to board a bus to evacuate Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, ahead of Hurricane Laura. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

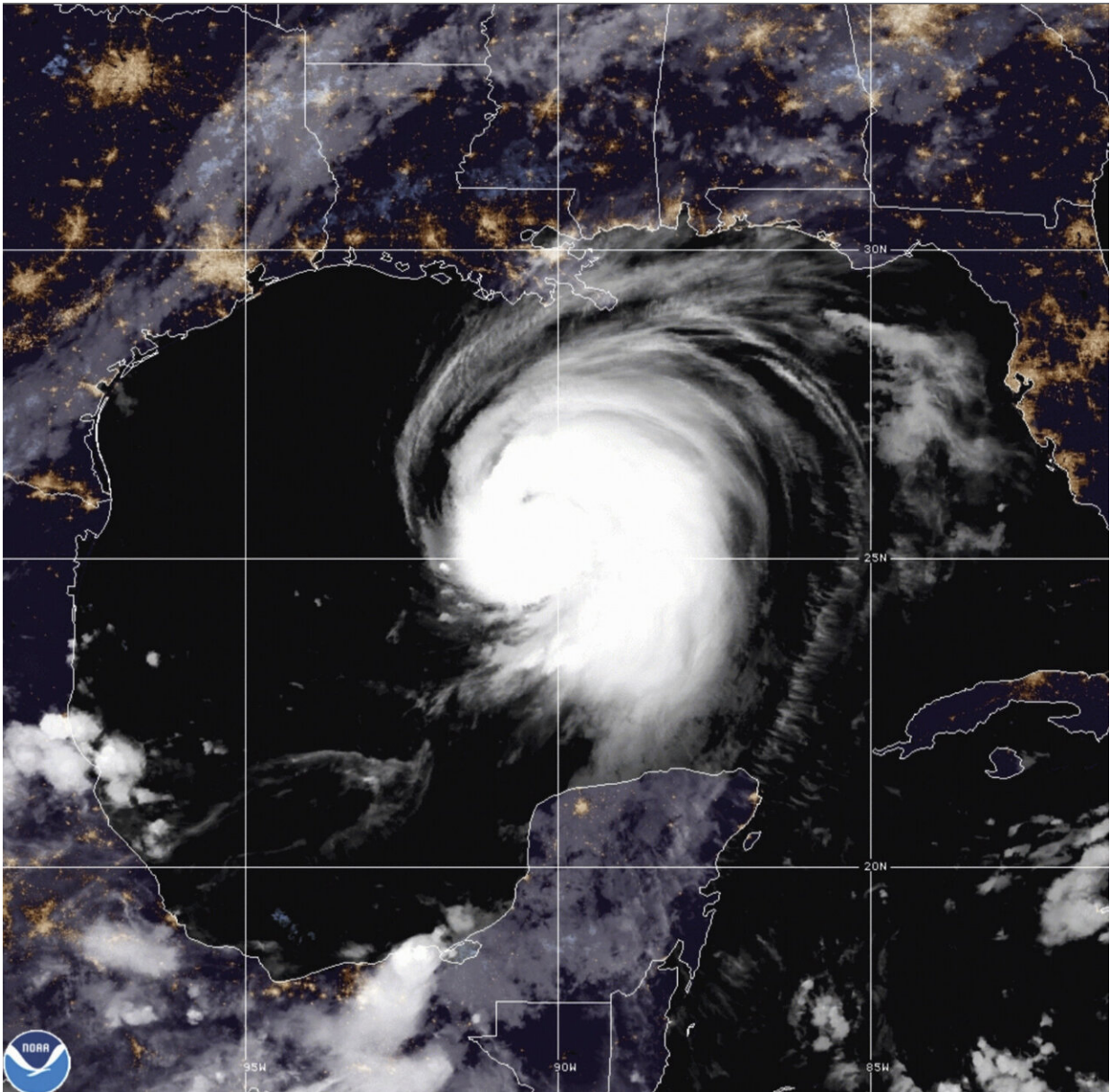
Abbott warned that families who do not get out of harm's way could be cut off from help long after the storm hits.

The National Hurricane Center kept raising its estimate of Laura's storm surge, from 10 feet just a couple of days ago to twice that size—a height that forecasters said would be especially deadly.

A Category 4 hurricane can cause damage so catastrophic that power outages may last for months in places, and wide areas could be uninhabitable for weeks or months. The threat of such devastation posed

a new disaster-relief challenge for a government already straining to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Among the parts of Louisiana that were under evacuation orders were areas turning up high rates of positive COVID-19 tests.

By Wednesday afternoon, Laura had maximum sustained winds of 140 mph (225 kph) as it churned about 200 miles (320 kilometers) from Lake Charles, moving northwest at 16 mph (26 kph). Forecasters predict winds will reach at least 145 mph winds but may weaken slightly before landfall.



This satellite image released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) shows Hurricane Laura churning in the Gulf of Mexico, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020. Forecasters say Laura is rapidly intensifying and will become a "catastrophic" Category 4 hurricane before landfall. (NOAA via AP)

"Heed the advice of your local authorities. If they tell you to go, go!"

Your life depends on it today," said Joel Cline, tropical program coordinator at the National Weather Service. "It's a serious day and you need to listen to them."

On Twitter, President Donald Trump also urged coastal residents to heed local officials. Hurricane warnings were issued from San Luis Pass, Texas, to Intracoastal City, Louisiana, and reached inland for 200 miles (322 kilometers). Storm surge warnings were in effect from Freeport, Texas, to the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Forecasters said storm surge topped by waves could submerge entire towns. Water was already rising in the small Louisiana community of Holly Beach in the imperiled Cameron Parish, which forecasters have warned would be part of the Gulf of Mexico after the storm came ashore.



Shawn Nelson, 7, right, and Asia Nelson, 6, left, board a bus to evacuate Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, ahead of Hurricane Laura. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

Edwards lamented that the impending storm meant suspension of community testing for COVID-19 at a crucial time—as elementary and secondary schools in Louisiana are opening and students are returning to college campuses. "We're basically going to be blind for this week," Edwards said, referring to the lack of testing.

Laura is expected to dump massive amounts of rain as it moves inland, causing widespread flash flooding in states far from the coast. Flood watches were issued for much of Arkansas, and forecasters said heavy rainfall could arrive by Friday in parts of Missouri, Tennessee and Kentucky. Laura is so powerful that it's expected to become a tropical storm again once it reaches the Atlantic Ocean, potentially menacing the Northeast.

Even before dawn Wednesday, officials in Austin said the city had run out of free hotel rooms to offer evacuees and had begun directing families fleeing the storm to a shelter nearly 200 miles farther north. In Texas' Hardin County, which has more than 57,000 residents along the coast, officials warned that anyone who tried riding out the storm faced days or weeks without electricity.



A Cameron Parish Sheriff's deputy mans a roadblock in the rain on LA 27 as residents evacuate Cameron in Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, ahead of Hurricane Laura. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

Becky Clements, 56, evacuated from Lake Charles after hearing that it could suffer a direct hit, almost exactly 15 years after Hurricane Rita destroyed the city. She and her family found an AirBnb hundreds of miles inland.

"The devastation afterward in our town and that whole corner of the state was just awful," Clements said. "Whole communities were washed away, never to exist again. ... So knowing how devastating the storms are, there was no way we were going to stay for this."

Clements, a church educator, said she fears for her office, which is in a trailer following recent construction.

"I very much anticipate that my office will be gone when I get back. It will be scattered throughout that field."

The hurricane also threatens 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. Consumers are unlikely to see big price hikes however, because the pandemic has decimated demand for fuel.



People line up to board buses to evacuate Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, ahead of Hurricane Laura. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)



People looking to evacuate the path of Hurricane Laura arrive at the civic center where evacuation buses wait, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, in Port Arthur, Texas. Hurricane Laura is expected to make landfall in the area Wednesday night or early Thursday. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



People looking to evacuate the path of Hurricane Laura arrive at the civic center where evacuation buses wait, Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, in Port Arthur, Texas. Hurricane Laura is expected to make landfall in the area Wednesday night or early Thursday. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



John Prekosovich, left, and Joel Canales load a portable generator into A customer's vehicle at a Home Depot store as residents prepare for the possible landfall of Hurricane Laura, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020 in Houston. (Brett Coomer/Houston Chronicle via AP)



Issac Alvarado, right, and Kevin Enriquez board up windows on 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)



Cody Cloud takes a picture of the waves Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, in Galveston, Texas, as Hurricane Laura moves toward the Gulf Coast. Forecasters say Laura is rapidly intensifying and will become a "catastrophic" Category 4 hurricane before landfall. It's churning toward Texas and Louisiana, gathering wind and water that swirls over much of the Gulf of Mexico. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Owner Nick Gaido, top left, and Miguel Andrade secure a strap over a giant crab on the roof of 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)



Josue Blanco, left, and Alex Mendez photograph waves generated by Hurricane Laura as they crash into the rock groin at 37th Street in Galveston, Texas on Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020. Forecasters say Laura is rapidly intensifying and will become a "catastrophic" Category 4 hurricane before landfall. It's churning toward Texas and Louisiana, gathering wind and water that swirls over much of the Gulf of Mexico. (Jennifer Reynolds/The Galveston County Daily News via AP)



Jada Lawson, wipes the face fo her daughter Skyler Lawson, 4, as they wait to board buses to evacuate Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, ahead of Hurricane Laura. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)



Helpers distribute water as people board buses to evacuate Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, ahead of Hurricane Laura. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)



Yvonne Lancgo, of Lake Charles, waits to board a bus to evacuate Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, ahead of Hurricane Laura. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

"If Laura moves further west toward Houston, there will be a much bigger gasoline supply problem," Oil analyst Andrew Lipow said, since refineries usually take two to three weeks to resume full operations.

Laura closed in on the U.S. 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.

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Laura gains strength, could bring 'unsurvivable' storm surge (2020, August 26) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-08-laura-extremely-dangerous-category.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.