

Millions across Southeast bracing for potential tornadoes

March 17 2021



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Hundreds of schools, COVID-19 vaccination clinics, businesses and more shut down across the Deep South on Wednesday as forecasters warned of waves of severe weather including massive tornadoes, downpours and hail the size of tennis balls.

While nearly 16 million people in the Southeast could see powerful storms, the Storm Prediction Center said, a region of about 3 million stretching from southeastern Arkansas and northeastern Louisiana across Mississippi into Alabama was at high risk for big twisters that stay on the ground for miles, straight winds up to 80 mph (129 kph) and destructive hail.

Storms were possible all the way from northern Texas in the west to northern Illinois and as far east as the Carolinas.

The weather service issued tornado warnings in Texas, Mississippi and Alabama, but there were no immediate reports of damage. Tornado watches included parts of six states.

Dozens of schools systems in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi canceled classes, switched to online learning or dismissed students early, and Mississippi State University moved to virtual teaching because of the potential for danger at its campuses in Starkville and Meridian.

Large vaccination clinics where hundreds of people an hour can get shots without leaving their vehicles were canceled in Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. In the Mississippi capital of Jackson, state employees were warned to head to stairwells if they hear weather sirens. Near Birmingham, labor organizers canceled an outdoors event at an Amazon facility where workers are voting on union representation.

At least two waves of storms were likely, forecasters said, and the worst might not hit until a cold front passes overnight.

"The biggest question is how strong to severe these storms are going to be and if they're going to be tornadic right off the bat," said Gary Goggins, a forecaster with the National Weather Service office for Birmingham.

Gov. Kay Ivey placed Alabama under a state of emergency, and communities across the South used social media to share the location of tornado shelters. Dozens of people gathered in a gymnasium that was opened as a shelter in Tuscaloosa, where more than 50 people died in a twister during a weather outbreak that occurred 10 years ago next month.

In Jackson, Tennessee, officials said a civic center and the regional airport would be open for residents seeking shelter.

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