



Source: AccuWeather

AP/Carl Fox

Earl heads for land

Thousands evacuate Gulf Coast region Wednesday as latest hurricane approaches

PANAMA CITY BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Thousands of people fled the Gulf Coast on Wednesday as Tropical Storm Earl strengthened into a hurricane and veered toward Florida with drenching rain and wind up to 100 mph.

The storm center was expected to come ashore during the night somewhere around Panama City, then cut across Georgia and into South Carolina, with 10 inches of rain possible.

A hurricane warning was posted for about 320 miles of coastline, from Pascagoula, Miss., to a point near Tallahassee.

Islands off Tallahassee were under mandatory evacuation orders. Many people also left Santa Rosa Island, east of Pensacola, at the recommendation of condo and hotel managers, and a state park closed on St. George Island, connected to mainland by a single bridge. Evac-

uations were recommended in flood-prone areas elsewhere.

Traffic built up on coastal roads as people heeded the warnings.

"We decided to run for higher ground," said Eleanor Griffin, 70, of Dothan, Ala., who cut short a four-day family vacation on Santa Rosa Island.

Gulf Coast Medical Center in Panama City canceled elective surgery, tested generators and sent non-essential employees home. Eglin Air Force Base sent 30 fighter jets to Oklahoma. Schools along the coast of Alabama and Mississippi closed.

Before strengthening into the third hurricane of the season, Earl had been moving almost due north across the Gulf of Mexico, and Texas and Louisiana seemed to be the targets. Early Wednesday, however, Earl took a sharp right turn toward Florida.

"It's coming in so fast it's almost too late to make a decision," Rick Russell said as he left a Panama City Wal-Mart with a shopping bas-

"Earl's not going to make landfall so much at a point as Earl's going to slop up on the shore somewhere."

— Craig Fugate
Florida preparedness chief

ket full of batteries, water, milk and other supplies.

At 5 p.m. EDT, Earl was centered about 100 miles southwest of Destin,

and was moving to the west at 5 to 10 mph. Hurricane Earl reached 90 miles east of Grand Isle, La.

"Earl's not going to fall so much at a point as the storm drew near where," said Florida's chief Craig Fugate.

Rain fell across the southern edge and Georgia during the storm, as the storm drew near flooded several homes in Florida's Dauphin Island.

In 1985, Hurricane Opal, then named Opal, slammed into the Panhandle from the Gulf of Mexico, blowing from Hurricane Opal, the region's first 69 years. Erin claims Opal 27.

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