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Hurricane Milton strengthens to Category 5 as it approaches Florida: Live updates

[John Bacon](#), [Trevor Hughes](#), [Dinah Voyles Pulver](#) and [Christopher Cann](#) USA TODAY

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TAMPA, Fla. – Hurricane Milton regained Category 5 strength Tuesday as it barreled across the Gulf of Mexico toward the Florida Peninsula, where millions scrambled to wrap up storm preparations and evacuate vulnerable areas.

The National Hurricane Center said the Milton's storm surge presents an "extremely life-threatening situation" for the western coast of Florida, adding that damaging winds and torrential rainfall will extend well inland and outside the forecast cone. Hurricane warning maps show Florida blanketed in red and orange alerts.

Milton had undergone stunningly rapid intensification Monday, its sustained winds reaching 180 mph. By Tuesday morning, the wind speed dropped dramatically before climbing to 165 mph Tuesday evening.

While the storm is expected to weaken before it makes landfall Wednesday night, "Milton has the potential to be one of the most destructive hurricanes on record for west-central Florida," John Cangialosi, a specialist with the National Hurricane Center, warned in an update Tuesday.

Gov. Ron DeSantis told state residents in the path of Milton that "time is running out" before landfall, likely as a Category 3 storm. More than 1 million people were under evacuation orders in at least 16 counties, and both numbers were expected to climb as Milton draws closer to a coastline still recovering from Hurricane Helene's strike less than two weeks ago.

In St. Petersburg, Julie Bost fled for safety. Bost, 32, was a new mom with a 3-month-old baby when her home was flooded by Hurricane Idalia last year, causing \$65,000 in damage. “I couldn’t go through another flood,” Bost told the USA TODAY NETWORK – Florida. “I told my husband I couldn’t handle that again emotionally.”

'We're just exhausted': The battered and storm-weary prepare for landfall. Again.

Milton's path updates: Hurricane Milton tracker

Developments:

- Milton was centered about 480 miles southwest of Tampa, rolling east-northeast at 9 mph, according to the National Hurricane Center's 5 p.m. ET update.
- Rainfall amounts of 5 to 12 inches, with localized totals up to 18 inches, were expected across central to northern portions of the Florida Peninsula through Thursday, the hurricane center said. "Life-threatening" flooding was possible.

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Closer look at Milton's path: How the storm is unfolding

Florida evacuees cross state lines to escape Milton's wrath

In central Georgia, over a hundred miles north of the state line, Florida residents evacuating ahead of Hurricane Milton were stuck in snarled traffic and packed gas stations.

On Tuesday, a Buc-ee's gas station in Fort Valley was filled with Floridians. Among them was 20-year-old Angelina Stow and her mom, Vilisity. The pair – along with their dogs, Rogue and Charlie – were on a 460 mile journey from Clearwater to a hotel in Covington, Georgia.

They had tried to get rooms in places closer to Clearwater, but lodgings were already full with other evacuees.

"It's scary," said Angelina Stow. "We don't know what's going to happen. We're kind of blind right now."

Many others were also headed to Georgia and beyond on Tuesday to escape Milton. Outside the Buc-ee's, the northbound lanes were clogged with traffic. Vehicles drove far more steadily south, despite the number of line worker trucks headed the opposite direction toward Florida.

– *Douglas Soule, USA TODAY NETWORK-Florida*

Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando announce closures

Major tourist attractions including Universal Orlando and Walt Disney World announced closures ahead of Helene's expected landfall along the west coast of Florida.

Walt Disney World said its theme parks and Disney Springs will be closed in phases beginning at 1 p.m. Wednesday. Disney's Hollywood Studios and Animal Kingdom theme park will close at 1 p.m., and Magic Kingdom park, EPCOT and Disney Springs will close at 2 p.m.

"It is likely the theme parks will remain closed on Thursday, October 10," Walt Disney World said on its website. "We will consider opening Disney Springs on Thursday in the late afternoon, with limited offerings."

Universal Orlando announced on Tuesday that it will close its resort at 2 p.m. Wednesday and remain closed through Thursday ahead of Hurricane Milton's expected landfall. The closures will impact Universal's water theme park Volcano Bay and its annual Halloween Horror Nights, both of which will be closed Wednesday and Thursday. The park's hotels will remain operational.

Florida governor to residents under evacuation orders: 'Get out now'

DeSantis on Tuesday told Florida residents under evacuation orders to evacuate to higher ground and away from the coast and flood-prone areas as Milton approaches the state.

“You should be executing your plan,” he said. “If you’re going to get out, get out now. You have time today – time will be running out very shortly if you wait any longer.”

DeSantis said the powerful hurricane is expected to rip across the Florida Peninsula as a hurricane and that those in mobile homes or other vulnerable structures should heed advisories and orders issued by their county governments, even if they are well inland from the coast.

In addition, DeSantis said there is "an unprecedented effort underway" to ensure the state is prepared for Milton's wrath.

As authorities rush to pick up debris from Helene, trucks being escorted by Florida Highway Patrol cruisers are filling up gas stations for residents in need. Tens of thousands of linemen from as far as California are positioned to begin restoration as soon as the storm passes. And up to 8,000 Florida National Guard soldiers will be deployed to assist in the preparation and recovery effort.

“This is probably the largest national guard mobilization in advance of a storm in Florida history,” DeSantis said.

Plane carrying evacuees crashes in Florida; passengers rescued

A small passenger plane carrying people evacuating ahead of Hurricane Milton crashed into Tampa Bay Tuesday morning, according to multiple media reports.

Four passengers were aboard the plane that departed from Albert Whitted Airport in St. Petersburg, according to the Tampa Bay Times and Associated Press, which both cited Ashlie Handy, a spokesperson for St. Petersburg Fire Rescue.

A boater rescued the four passengers as well as a dog that was on the plane, according to the Tampa Bay Times. Three of the four passengers were taken to a nearby hospital.

The plane hit the water just 500 yards from the St. Petersburg Pier, a highly trafficked attraction that offers sweeping view of the city's waterfront, the outlet reported.

Is there another hurricane after Milton?

Once Hurricane Milton roars across Florida on Thursday, the U.S. might see at least a temporary break in the storm parade, forecasters say. As of Tuesday, other than Milton and distant Tropical Storm Leslie, there are no named storms anywhere in the Atlantic basin, which includes storms in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea.

The National Hurricane Center predicts that Leslie will wander around the central Atlantic for the next several days before "degenerating into a remnant low" by the weekend. As for Milton, once it crosses Florida, all forecasts show it weakening and heading out to sea away from land by the end of the week.

Two other weather disturbances are also being monitored for potential tropical development, the hurricane center said. One, near the east coast of Florida, could briefly start to form, but "upper-level winds are likely to increase later in the week, which should limit further development," the hurricane center said. Another disturbance is about to emerge off the coast of Africa, and some "limited development" is possible as it spins across the eastern Atlantic Ocean by the end of the week.

– *Doyle Rice*

What is eyewall replacement? Why could Milton get bigger?

Forecasters expect fluctuations in wind speeds until Milton reaches the coast as the hurricane undergoes potential "eyewall replacement cycles" such as the one that happened overnight. Eyewall replacement is a natural process that takes place at the center of strong hurricanes. A secondary "eye" develops inside a storm farther away from the existing eyewall in the core of the storm. Eventually a new eyewall forms.

The replacement cycle can steal heat generation from the center, said James Franklin, a retired branch chief for the hurricane center. Winds begin to broaden and spread out to match the areas where heat is being released, and a new eyewall forms.

The cycles can cause the most intense winds at the center of the storm to fluctuate higher or lower, which may bounce a storm back and forth from one category of wind speeds to another. Milton completed an eyewall replacement cycle overnight Monday and the new eye quickly contracted down in size by almost half, Robbie Berg, one of the center's hurricane specialists, wrote in an 11 a.m. forecast discussion.

The replacement cycles also can cause a storm to grow larger. Hence, the hurricane center warned Tuesday that Milton could double in size before landfall overnight Wednesday.

'Matter of life and death': Biden, Harris urge Floridians to flee

President Joe Biden warned Tuesday that Hurricane Milton could be one of the worst storms to hit Florida in a century and urged anyone under an evacuation order to leave “now, now, now.”

“It’s a matter of life and death,” he said.

Vice President Kamala Harris in an appearance on “The View” urged Floridians in the path of the storm to listen to their local officials.

“If they’re telling you to evacuate, get your stuff and go,” Harris said. “Whatever they’re telling you.”

– *Michael Collins and Francesca Chambers*

'Reverse storm surge' possible with Milton

Depending on where Hurricane Milton lands, the Tampa Bay area could be flooded with a huge storm surge – or it could have its bay sucked dry of water. Reverse storm surge – which exposes sand, silt and debris typically covered by water – is possible in Florida because of Milton, and Tampa Bay is especially vulnerable, experts say.

It could happen this week if Milton makes landfall to the south of Tampa Bay, said WeatherTiger meteorologist Ryan Truchelut. Storm surge happens as a tropical storm or

hurricane pushes water toward the coast, triggering catastrophic flooding along the shore and in bays and inlets. With reverse storm surge, especially in larger storms, the opposite happens, explained AccuWeather meteorologist Paul Pastelok in 2022, after Ian hit. The result is bare ground in some places, particularly along the shoreline, according to Pastelok.

“It can pull the water out because the wind flow is coming from land to ocean,” he said. “The power of the wind is incredible.”

– *Doyle Rice*

'Reverse storm surge': How Hurricane Milton could flood Tampa Bay or shockingly dry it

Florida woman 'still fighting' after cancer, Helene

Near the Tampa Bay Marina, Nancy Heidt, 80, watched Tuesday as her son continued clearing debris left by Helene. The storm shoved floodwater into her single-story home fronting the bay, ruining most everything but the tile floor of the kitchen and living room. Workers had already cut out several feet of drywall around the entire house to help halt the growth of black mold, which flourishes in humid post-hurricane conditions.

A large rolloff Dumpster sat in the driveway, overflowing with drywall debris, ruined food and broken appliances. Similar scenes played out around the neighborhood as homeowners, friends and contractors continued Helene cleanup while also trying to board up for Milton.

As his mom watched, Scott Heidt, 55, was “playing Tetris” in the garage with her few undamaged belongings and trying to prepare for even worse flooding.

“We had four feet of flooding from the last one,” he said. “If we get 12 feet from this one, we’re toast.”

Nancy Heidt said she had lived in the house for 50 years and although the area had seen many hurricanes, Helene was the single worst one she’d ever experienced. And the forecasts are for Milton to hit even harder.

She said she doesn’t have flood insurance but is thankful her deceased husband had set her up financially. “I beat cancer. I beat having a broken hip,” she said. “I’m still fighting.”

Couple's NC home hit by Helene; Florida home awaits Milton

Suzanne Vale and her husband say they feel haunted by storms. Late last month, they left their home in Burnsville, North Carolina, a mountain town outside Asheville, and drove to their home in Dunedin, just west of Tampa, to prepare it for Helene. But after Helene made landfall, it was their residence in North Carolina that was under threat. A tree had fallen on the roof and a nearby hillside collapsed.

Now, as Milton approaches Florida, the couple has been fortifying their home in Dunedin, which sits three blocks from the Gulf of Mexico, while contacting geotechnical engineers about damage to their Burnsville home.

“I am completely overwhelmed,” Vale told USA TODAY. “God is testing my patience.”

Much of Dunedin is still littered with debris and furniture cleared out of homes flooded by Helene. And as people rush to buy gas, water and other supplies, there is a palpable sense of anxiety and panic in the air, said Vale, a retired nurse.

“We bought the place up there so we would have a place to go if we lost our place in Florida,” Vale said. “Now we've got two places that are going to be wrecked.”

– *Christopher Cann*

FEMA chief dismisses Trump criticism

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell pushed back against former President Donald Trump's false claims about the recovery efforts following Hurricane Helene and indicated she was disappointed in the misinformation he was spreading.

Trump has spread baseless claims of hurricane relief efforts, including allegations that there are “no helicopters, no rescue” in North Carolina and that the federal government is only giving \$750 to those who have lost their homes. FEMA has addressed misinformation on its webpage and social media.

When asked about whether she thinks Trump is playing politics with the hurricane response, Criswell said in a press call Tuesday, “as it relates to the rumors...I'm frankly disappointed that we're still having to have this conversation.”

– *Sudiksha Kochi*

FEMA administrator pushes back: Rejects Trump claims on hurricane recovery efforts

Residents ride out the storm in Tampa shelter

At the Middleton High School shelter in Tampa, a frustrated Bill Brotherton, 70, signed up to stay for the storm's duration. With his eclectic parrot Mikey perched atop his shoulder, Brotherton said he had four feet of flooding at his house from Helene, which also ruined several prized vehicles. He's been sleeping in his car ever since. Monday night, he left his car parked at the nearby Tampa airport and on Tuesday morning caught a ride over to the shelter, where he planned to ride out the storm. “It's so overwhelming I can barely speak. I can't think. I can't spell. I'm having chest pains,” he said, tears welling in his eyes. “I go to sleep and I don't want to wake up but I keep waking up.”

State clears path for residents heading out

Storm surge of up to 15 feet was forecast for Sarasota, Tampa and other west-central areas. Evacuations were underway in at least 16 counties, and state officials suspended tolls and opened road shoulders to traffic. State troopers were escorting gasoline tankers into the Tampa area to ensure evacuees had enough gas to leave.

Northbound traffic on I-95 on the state's east coast was steady and rest areas were packed with Floridians, who chatted about the hurricane as they stretched their legs and walked dogs, some explaining they'd crossed the state to avoid the gridlock on Interstate 75. Many hotels were sold out through Georgia and into South Carolina.

Shelters were open in all 67 Florida counties as authorities urged residents of evacuation zones not to attempt to ride out the storm.

"I can say without any dramatization whatsoever, if you choose to stay in one of those evacuation areas you're gonna die," Tampa Mayor Jane Castor told CNN.

'Never had this many resources,' Gov. DeSantis says

Less than 48 hours before Hurricane Milton's expected landfall on Florida's west coast, resources are pouring into the state to address inevitable power outages and rescue missions. DeSantis said nearly 40,000 electrical line repairmen are in Florida to turn the power back on after Milton sweeps through. Many of the linemen came from as far as California, DeSantis said.

Before landfall, 8,000 National Guard members will be activated in Florida, DeSantis said. Fuel will be sent to gas stations around the clock, he said, adding that state authorities are collaborating with oil truck operators for Walmart, Shell and other companies.

"We've never had this many resources prior to a storm," DeSantis said.

– *Claire Thornton*

Milton brings hurricane expert to tears

Hurricane specialist John Morales broke down on-air as he was discussing the threat of Hurricane Milton on a local south Florida TV station. The "extremely dangerous" storm is a Category 4 hurricane expected to make landfall this week in the state.

"I apologize," he said through tears. "This is just horrific."

Mental health professionals sympathized with Morales' position; being the bearer of bad news isn't easy. But they commended his bravery of sharing his grief on air, as it could help others prepare for the storm as well as begin to process grief of their own. The full forecaster story is here.

– *David Oliver*

Shelter evacuees tested for COVID

As evacuees drove north or east, other people prepared to remain in Tampa during Milton's passage. At the Pizzo K-8 school on the University of Southern Florida campus in East Tampa, about 100 people had already signed up to sleep in the makeshift dormitory areas, supervised by dozens of police officers and county workers. Arrivals were screened for COVID-19 and other illnesses, and workers handed out paperwork explaining shelter rules, including that all services and food were free, and that mental-health experts were available to talk. A shelter manager said nine shelters were open already with many more set to open around Hillsborough County based on need.

Hundreds of flights already canceled ahead of storm

Nearly 700 U.S. flights were canceled early Tuesday and more than 1,500 are already canceled for Wednesday, according to flight-tracking website FlightAware. Carriers including American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines have issued waivers allowing travelers going to or from some Florida airports to change their tickets for no extra charge. Customers can check their airline's website for specific details on travel advisories.

Tampa International Airport suspended flight operations Tuesday, and authorities said it would "reopen when safe to do so."

Under Department of Transportation rules, anyone whose flight was canceled is eligible for a refund. However, they aren't entitled to any compensation for delays since weather is outside airline control. Full story on flight cancellations [here](#).

– *Eve Chen*

Hurricane Milton's impact on flights: What to expect from your airline.

Marco Island empties ahead of Milton

Ahead of a mandatory evacuation order for those in Marco Island, south of Naples, some condominiums were putting sandbags near doors ahead of a potential storm surge. Residents in low-lying areas were urged to prepare their homes and move to higher ground by Tuesday afternoon, the Marco Island officials said on social media, citing rainfall and tides that could also contribute to flooding.

Two years ago, during Hurricane Ian, Marco Island saw an 8-foot storm surge on average and damage to 304 residential buildings and 63 commercial buildings, according to local reports. Around Collier County, a series of shelters were set to open Tuesday afternoon, including one for those who require nursing care, authorities said. Marco Island Executive Airport was set to close Tuesday at 7 p.m.

Farther north, Southwest Florida International Airport was operating Tuesday but saw dozens of cancellations of flights scheduled for departure or arrival at the airport, according to FlightAware. The airport, located near Fort Myers, planned to shut down Wednesday and Thursday.

– *Chris Kenning*

Read the full story: Could Milton become a Category 6?

Wind shear could provide blessing and curse

Hurricane Milton could be significantly altered by wind shear, a mixed blessing. The strength of the storm, its wind speeds and the breadth of its storm surge all will depend on whether winds blowing over the Gulf of Mexico will be strong enough to break up its structure. If the winds Milton encounters as it approach Florida are strong enough to disrupt its inner core, the storm's most intense winds could weaken a little, said James Franklin, a retired branch chief for the hurricane specialists at the National Hurricane Center.

At the same time, the hurricane could grow in size and push more water onto shore in a surge of seawater, Franklin said. When the wind shear is strong enough, "it's essentially blowing the top off the hurricane." Read the full story on wind shear.

– *Dinah Voyles Pulver*

Bigger or stronger? How winds will shape Hurricane Milton on Tuesday.

Gas, supplies running low in Tampa area

Across the region, supplies were already running low, especially fuel. In Lakeland, about 30 miles inland of Tampa, drivers were waiting in line at multiple gas stations to fuel up, and some stations had already run out. The fuel-price tracking app GasBuddy showed many Tampa-area stations closed. In a Lakeland Walmart, workers hurriedly stocked shelves with Gatorade and snacks, and the store was sold out of toilet paper and cases of bottled water. Many stores, including Starbucks, posted signs that they would close Tuesday night to give their workers time to prepare for Milton.

Longtime Florida resident 'not panicking'

Streams of customers and hurricane preppers filled big-box retailers in Manatee County ahead of Hurricane Milton. East Bradenton resident Karen Tonkin Wakefield made stops Monday at the Lowe's Home Improvement Store and an Aldi Grocery store in Parrish for her final preparations.

"I've lived here since 1982. I have two homes in Parrish and I'm just getting a few last-minute things," Wakefield said. "I'm feeling OK, not panicking because we had a lot left from the last one (Hurricane Helene) just a couple of weeks ago." Read more on Hurricane Milton prep.

– *Samantha Gholar, Sarasota Herald-Tribune*

Read the full story: Hurricane Milton prep continues in Florida

Could Milton become a Category 6 hurricane?

Milton, the rapidly developing hurricane that shows no signs of stopping, won't technically become a Category 6 because the category doesn't currently exist. But the storm could reach the level of a hypothetical Category 6 – and further stir debate about whether the National Hurricane Center's long-used scale for classifying hurricane wind speeds from Category 1 to 5 might need an overhaul.

If Milton had reached wind speeds of 192 mph, it would have surpassed a threshold that just five hurricanes and typhoons have reached since 1980, according to Michael Wehner, a climate scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, and Jim Kossin, a retired federal scientist and science advisor at the nonprofit First Street Foundation.

The pair authored a study looking at whether the extreme storms could become the basis of a Category 6 hurricane denomination. All five of the storms occurred over the previous decade. Kossin and Wehner said they weren't proposing adding a Category 6 to the wind scale but were trying to "inform broader discussions" about communicating the growing risks in a warming world.

— *Dinah Voyles Pulver and Michael Loria, USA TODAY*

Contributing: Jim Rosica and Gary Rohrer, USA TODAY NETWORK