

Eta remains a tropical storm as Florida prepares for 2nd hit

11 November 2020, by Curt Anderson and Freida Frisaro



Residents clear debris from a flooded street in the Driftwood Acres Mobile Home Park, in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Eta, Tuesday, Nov. 10, 2020, in Davie, Fla. Tropical Storm Eta was squatting off western Cuba on Tuesday after drifting away from South Florida, where it unleashed a deluge that flooded entire neighborhoods and covered the floors of some homes and businesses. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)

Eta remained a tropical storm Wednesday afternoon as it prepared to skirt past the heavily populated Tampa Bay region in Florida and crash ashore in the coming hours somewhere to the north along the Gulf of Mexico coast.

The storm's maximum sustained winds remained at about 70 mph (110 kph) off Florida's west coast as the storm moved northward, according to the National Hurricane Center in Miami. Additional weakening was possible as Eta approaches the coast.

Forecasters had posted—but later discontinued—a hurricane watch for a 120-mile (190-kilometer) stretch that includes Tampa and St. Petersburg. Eta had briefly attained hurricane strength Wednesday morning but then weakened.

Subsequently, a tropical storm warning was issued for the same general area.

The storm has been in the Gulf of Mexico since crossing over South Florida on Sunday. At 7 p.m. Wednesday, Eta was located 45 miles (70 kilometers) west of St. Petersburg and was moving north at 12 mph (19 kph), the hurricane center reported.

The Tampa Bay region is home to more than 3.5 million people across five coastal counties. No mandatory evacuations were immediately ordered but authorities began opening shelters for anyone needing them. No serious damage or flooding was immediately reported.



Petra Gringrich, left, and Maria Gomez, both of Tampa, Fla., cross a rain soaked Dodecanese Boulevard in downtown Tarpon Springs while shopping Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020 from heavy rain from Tropical Storm Eta. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Douglas R. Clifford/Tampa Bay Times via AP)

Tampa Mayor Jane Castor said special care is

taken at shelters to protect people from the coronavirus, such as social distancing, and suggested people bring their own masks.

"Everything will be done to make sure all of our residents are safe," Castor said.

The forecast prompted school officials in Pinellas and Pasco counties, which includes St. Petersburg, to send students home early Wednesday. Both counties announced schools would remain closed Thursday, as did neighboring Hillsborough County.

The Florida Highway Patrol closed the Sunshine Skyway Bridge that links Pinellas and Manatee counties because of high winds. Tampa International Airport tweeted that it would suspend operations at 3 p.m. Wednesday.

In Pasco County, officials set up four do-it-yourself locations for people to fill sandbags. In Tampa, the Busch Gardens theme park announced it was closed Wednesday and several Veterans Day events in the area were canceled.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued an expanded emergency declaration to include 13 counties along or near the Gulf coast, adding them to South Florida counties. DeSantis also asked for an early emergency order from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to free resources needed to tackle the storm. President Donald Trump granted the request Wednesday evening.

U.S. Senators Marco Rubio and Rick Scott, who represent Florida, had sent a letter to Trump earlier Wednesday in support of DeSantis' request.

"The 2020 Atlantic hurricane season has been particularly challenging due to the number and severity of storms, as well as the unique difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic," the Republican senators wrote.

A coronavirus testing site at Tropicana Field was also closed Wednesday.

The hurricane center said "life-threatening storm surge" is possible early Thursday, and forecasters advised residents to heed warnings from local officials. Tropical storm-force winds are expected in the area by late Wednesday.



Victoria Rodriguez, left, and Angela Mojica, right, walk on a flooded street in the Driftwood Acres Mobile Home Park, in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Eta, Tuesday, Nov. 10, 2020, in Davie, Fla. Tropical Storm Eta was squatting off western Cuba on Tuesday after drifting away from South Florida, where it unleashed a deluge that flooded entire neighborhoods and covered the floors of some homes and businesses. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)



Sponge diver Alan Fox, 16, of Tarpon Springs, Fla., slacks the lines Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020, on his sponge boat, at the Tarpon Springs Sponge Docks in preparation for Tropical Storm Eta. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Douglas R. Clifford/Tampa Bay Times via AP)

Forecasts call for more rain from the storm system over parts of already drenched South Florida.

"Never seen this, never, not this deep," said Anthony Lyas, who has lived in his now-waterlogged Fort Lauderdale neighborhood since 1996. He described hearing water and debris slamming against his shuttered home overnight as the storm crossed Florida.

The storm first hit Nicaragua as a Category 4 hurricane and killed at least 120 people in Central America and Mexico, with scores more missing. It then moved into the Gulf of Mexico early Monday near where the Everglades meet the sea, with maximum sustained winds of 50 mph (85 kph).

There was nowhere for the water to go across much of South Florida, which had already experienced nearly 14 inches (35 centimeters) of rain in October.

Eta hit land late Sunday as it blew over Lower Matecumbe, in the middle of the chain of small islands that form the Keys, but the heavily populated areas of Miami-Dade and Broward Counties bore the brunt of the fury.

2020, as squalls from Tropical Storm Eta move through Pinellas County. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Scott Keeler/Tampa Bay Times via AP)



Residents clear debris from a flooded street in the Driftwood Acres Mobile Home Park in the shadow of the Guitar Hotel at Seminole Hard Rock, in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Eta, Tuesday, Nov. 10, 2020, in Davie, Fla. Tropical Storm Eta was squatting off western Cuba on Tuesday after drifting away from South Florida, where it unleashed a deluge that flooded entire neighborhoods and covered the floors of some homes and businesses. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)



Water splashes against the seawall along Pass A Grille Way in St. Pete Beach, Fla., on Wednesday, Nov 11,



Surfer Emily Ashe, 22, Miami, wades through an angry Gulf of Mexico as waves pound Pass-A-Grille Beach, St.

Pete Beach, Fla., during Tropical Storm Eta, Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Scott Keeler/Tampa Bay Times via AP)

Way in St. Pete Beach, Fla., on Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020 as squalls from Tropical Storm Eta move through Pinellas County. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Scott Keeler/Tampa Bay Times via AP)



Brooke Gross, 12, of Port Richey, center, loads a sandbag onto a pickup truck at one of Pasco County's four self-serve sandbag stations at the Magnolia Valley Golf Course, Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020, in New Port Richey, Fla. Residents in the area scramble to protect their property from potential flooding as Tropical Storm Eta begins to deliver periods of squally weather to continue through today and into tomorrow as rain bands move into the Tampa Bay area. (Douglas R. Clifford/Tampa Bay Times via AP)

Alyssa Onessimo, 15, on left, and her sister Adriana Onessimo, 18, work to fill two gas container for their family's generator in preparation for Hurricane Eta at the 7-Eleven on Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020, in St. Petersburg, Fla. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Dirk Shadd/Tampa Bay Times via AP)



Water splashes against the seawall along Pass A Grille



Leslie Crowell loads water, paper towels and other groceries into her car Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020 at Publix in preparation for Tropical Storm Eta in Tampa,

Fla. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Martha Asencio Rhine/Tampa Bay Times via AP)



Nurse Liza Hart, back, and Jennie Mosbauer, a nutritionist, speak with a man at an emergency shelter set up due to Tropical Storm Eta at Middleton High School, Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020, in Tampa, Fla. Eta has weakened to a tropical storm just hours after regaining hurricane strength as Florida braces for a second hit from the storm. (Martha Asencio Rhine/Tampa Bay Times via AP)

It was the 28th named storm of a busy Atlantic hurricane season, tying the 2005 record for named storms. And late Monday, it was followed by the 29th storm—Theta.

The hurricane center said Theta broke the record of 28 named storms in 2005. Theta was centered Wednesday afternoon about 670 miles (1,080 kilometers) southwest of the Azores, bearing top sustained winds of 60 mph (95 kph) as that system moved east-northeast at 10 mph (17 kph).

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APA citation: Eta remains a tropical storm as Florida prepares for 2nd hit (2020, November 11) retrieved 10 August 2022 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-11-eta-regains-hurricane-strength-florida.html>

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