Tropical Storm Debby turning north

Heads for Fla. panhandle

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USA TODAY

Hard-to-predict Tropical Storm Debby may have made up its mind.

After a weekend of shifting forecasts, the National Hurricane Center said late Sunday that the storm should meander north for several days before making landfall midweek in the Florida Panhandle or Alabama.

Earlier forecasts had it moving west toward Louisiana or Texas.

Chris Landsea, a meteorologist at the hurricane center, said forecasters rely on computer models that were contradictory until Sunday.

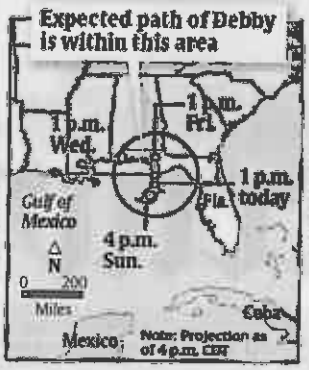
"They came into a bit more of an agreement that the westward turn is less likely," he said.

Coastal Alabama and parts of Florida, including the Panhandle, remained under tropical storm warnings. Debby dumped heavy rain in Florida on Sunday and spawned severe thunderstorms and tornadoes.

Highlands County Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Nell Hays said a woman was found dead in a house in Venus, Fla., that was destroyed by a storm.

Debby's 60-mph winds were kicking up rough waves along Florida Panhandle beaches Sunday.

High winds forced the closure of an interstate bridge that spans Tampa Bay and links St. Petersburg with areas to the southeast.



Source: National Hurricane Center

"The westward turn is less likely."

Chris Landsea, meteorologist at the National Hurricane Center

Twenty-three percent of oil and gas production in the Gulf of Mexico was suspended, a government hurricane response team reported. Employees were evacuated from 13 drilling rigs and 61 production platforms.

Debby's slow motion will make rainfall the primary threat from the storm. Up to 10 inches is likely in some regions along the Gulf Coast, reports meteorologist Jeff Masters of private forecasting company Weather Underground.

The Pensacola area is at the greatest risk, hurricane center spokesman Dennis Feltgen said, because heavy rains caused flooding two weeks ago. "The ground is still saturated and its capacity to take more heavy rains is limited," he says.

Masters said, "Farther to the east, along the rest of the Gulf Coast of Florida, moderate to severe drought prevails, and flooding from Debby will be less of an issue."

AccuWeather meteorologist Kristina Pydynowski noted that Debby's formation in the Gulf on Saturday marked the first time since record-keeping began in 1851 that four named tropical storms formed in the Atlantic before July.

Contributing: The Associated Press