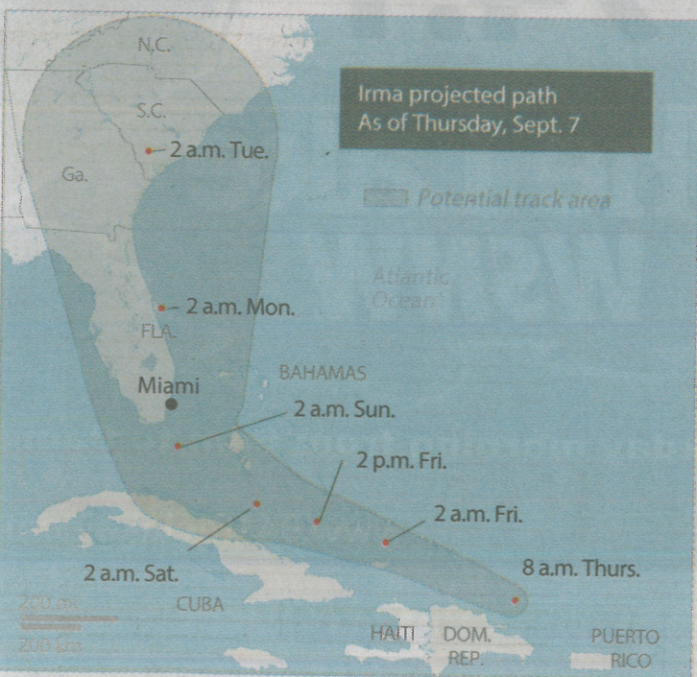


Deadly storm heads for state



Northbound traffic on the turnpike near Sunrise Boulevard is backed up in the rain as motorists prepare for Hurricane Irma on Thursday in Sunrise, Fla. Irma cut a path of devastation across the northern Caribbean, leaving thousands homeless after destroying buildings and uprooting trees on a track Thursday that could lead to a catastrophic strike on Florida and other Southeast states. ASSOCIATED PRESS

Governor: Evacuation order could come today



BY RUSS BYNUM
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAVANNAH, Ga. — On the same day Gov. Henry McMaster weighed whether to order evacuations for parts of South Carolina, Georgia's governor on Thursday ordered nearly 540,000 coastal residents to evacuate inland ahead of Hurricane Irma.

Authorities warned the storm had the potential to strike as a major hurricane, something the Georgia coast hasn't seen in more than a century.

"If there's a freight train coming at you, then you get off the tracks," said Jason Buelterman, mayor of Tybee Island, a beach community of more than 3,000 residents east of Savannah.

Gov. Nathan Deal ordered all six Georgia coastal counties to start evacuating at 8 a.m. Saturday. That's when officials planned to

» INSIDE

- Expert says social media can save lives during natural disasters. **A2**
- Duke Energy is preparing its customers for the storm. **A3**
- Irma forces the postponement of an emergency preparedness presentation set for next week. **A3**
- A guest editorial lists preparation tips from AAA Carolinas. **A4**
- Local school districts are keeping their eyes on Hurricane Irma. **A6**
- Nations rush to help islands devastated by deadly storm. **D1**

away portions of some neighbors' roofs and slung debris hard enough to smash windows, the couple returned to a home unscathed.

Even after the evacuation order was issued, they talked of riding out Irma at home.

"I may not go at Category 3 if the surge isn't so high," Mike Gerald said.

"I don't know, honey," his wife replied. "Where do we have to go except the bathroom and the back bedroom?"

Still, Becky Gerald said she planned to remain on the island as long as Irma wasn't forecast to arrive as a major storm.

"There's just things I can't save," she said.

"I have all my mother's antiques. You spend your whole life working hard and in a flash it's all gone."

No evacuations had been declared yet in neighboring South Carolina, which hasn't had a major hurricane strike in nearly 28 years. But Ed Putnam wasn't taking chances. He drove to St. Helena Island east of Beaufort with a truckload of supplies to get his cabin, boat and sailboat storm-ready.

Putnam has no plans to stick around.

Irma had winds of 175 mph Thursday as it raked across Caribbean island toward South Florida.

Forecasters said tropical-storm-force winds

could reach Georgia over the weekend and possibly South Carolina soon after.

"I've seen the videos of what happened to those poor people on those islands," Putnam said of Irma's devastation in the Caribbean. "If this is as strong as they say it is going to be, then there is no choice. Your life is more important than anything else."

Communities all along South Carolina's coast are getting ready for the deadly storm.

In Beaufort County, officials are closing all offices at noon today.

Charleston County schools and surrounding systems are canceling classes from today until Tuesday.

Georgia coastal residents have been told to flee a storm. The last time was when Hurricane Matthew brushed the state's 100-mile coast without coming ashore last October. That storm caused three deaths in Georgia and an estimated \$500 million in damage.

Traffic was already heavy on Interstate 75 to Atlanta by Thursday afternoon with evacuees streaming out of Florida. Forecasts called for Irma's center to be near the Georgia-Florida line Monday morning, though the exact path and storm intensity remained uncertain.

In Chatham County, Georgia's most populous coastal county that includes Savannah, emergency management director Dennis Jones warned Irma could bash the coast with 15 feet of storm surge and force floodwaters up the Savannah and Ogeechee Rivers, potentially swamping 60 percent of the county.

"What we saw during Matthew could exponentially increase," Jones said.

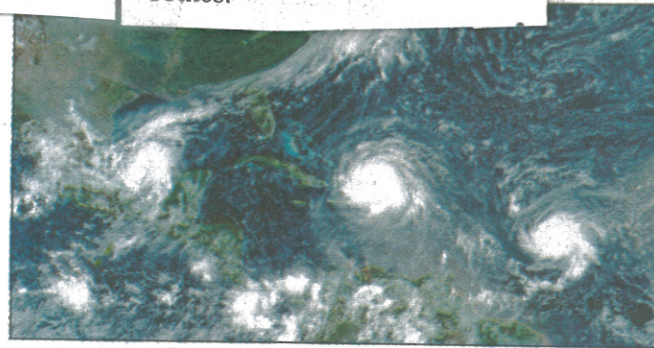
He held out the possibility that Irma could strike Georgia as a Category 3 or greater hurricane. The last storm that powerful to make landfall on the Georgia coast struck in 1898.

Becky and Mike Gerald evacuated their Tybee Island condo a block from the beach for Matthew. Though that storm ripped

In Myrtle Beach, Fire Chief Alvin Payne said he is breathing easier with forecasts steady in showing Irma coming ashore between Hilton Head Island and Charleston. But he said residents should not let their guard down yet, and evacuations could still be necessary.

Beaufort County Sheriff P.J. Tanner said Thursday that leaving before an official evacuation allows people to travel any direction they like.

Tanner said he expects a state-ordered evacuation by Saturday morning as Irma threatens South Carolina. At that point, the sheriff said, traffic will be limited to only specific routes.



Record-shattering Irma

WINDS:

185 mph maximum

- Irma is the **strongest storm on record** to hit the Leeward Islands.

- It is the **strongest storm** to exist outside of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico.

**PRESSURE: 914 millibars
(26.99 inches of mercury)**

- Irma has the **lowest pressure** since Hurricane Dean in 2007 (905 mb) and the 10th lowest since satellites have been used to track storms. It is the **lowest pressure on record** for a hurricane outside of the Gulf of Mexico or the western Caribbean.

DURATION

(as of Sept. 7 at 11 a.m. EDT)

- Irma's winds have blown at 185 mph for 37 hours, the **longest of any cyclone on record**.
- At 2.25 days, Irma is the **fourth longest hurricane** at Category 5 strength.

turn all lanes of Interstate 16 into a one-way route inland, sending traffic west from Savannah.

Meanwhile, McMaster said he will decide today whether to ask people to leave the South Carolina coast. If he does order an evacuation, lanes on Interstate 26 and other evacuation routes would be reversed starting at 10 a.m. Saturday.

The National Weather Service said its forecast is not set in stone, but much of South Carolina could experience rain and wind from Irma on Monday. The storm surge could go over barrier islands near where the eye of the storm comes ashore.

McMaster also signed two executive orders Thursday. One orders more than 140 health care facilities, including hospice centers, nursing homes and hospitals, in eight counties on or near the coast to evacuate.

The other requires owners of 2,370 public and private dams to lower their lake water levels. McMaster said state workers have the authority to release the water if owners won't. That order is aimed at preventing a repeat of October 2015, when bursting and overflowing dams amid historic rainfalls worsened deadly flooding.

It's the second time in less than a year that