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Hurricane Watch Issued for USVI, Vieques, and Culebra as Tropical Storm Ernesto Nears

Hurricane watch issued for the USVI, Vieques, and Culebra as Tropical Storm Ernesto intensifies: flooding, high winds, and hazardous marine conditions expected

Hurricane Season / **Published On August 13, 2024 11:40 AM /**

Staff Consortium **August 13, 2024**

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The National Hurricane Center at 11:00 a.m. Tues. August 13 issued a hurricane watch for the USVI, Vieques, and Culebra. By. NOAA

The National Hurricane Center has issued a Hurricane Watch for the U.S. Virgin Islands, Vieques, and Culebra due to the impending approach of Tropical Storm Ernesto. The storm is expected to intensify as it nears the islands later today and tonight.

As of the latest advisory from the National Hurricane Center (NHC) at 11:00 a.m. on Tuesday, August 13, 2024, the center of Tropical Storm Ernesto was located near latitude 16.9 North and longitude 62.6 West, approximately 155 miles east-southeast of St. Croix and 250 miles east-southeast of San Juan, Puerto Rico. The storm is moving west-northwest at a speed of 18 mph (30 km/h), and this general motion is expected to continue through tonight. By Wednesday and Thursday, Ernesto is forecast to shift toward the northwest and then north at a slower pace.

On the current forecast track, the center of Ernesto should pass near or over the Virgin Islands this evening, continuing just northeast and north of Puerto Rico tonight and into Wednesday. Ernesto is then expected to move over the western Atlantic later in the week. Maximum sustained winds have increased to approximately 50 mph (85 km/h) with higher gusts. Further strengthening is predicted, with Ernesto likely becoming a hurricane by early Wednesday. Tropical-storm-force winds extend outward up to 105 miles (165 km) from the center, with recent reports indicating wind gusts of 65 mph (105 km/h) on St. Barthelemy. The estimated minimum central pressure of Ernesto is 1003 mb (29.62 inches).

The main risks associated with Ernesto remain flooding and hazardous marine conditions. The following hazards are expected:

Rainfall: Ernesto is forecast to bring total rainfall accumulations of 4 to 6 inches over portions of the Leeward Islands from Guadeloupe to Dominica, and across the U.S. and British Virgin Islands. Southeastern Puerto Rico may experience 6 to 8 inches of rain, with maximum amounts reaching up to 10 inches, while northwestern Puerto Rico can expect 2 to 4 inches. These heavy rains could lead to flash flooding, mudslides, and river flooding.

Wind: Tropical storm conditions are already present in parts of the Leeward Islands within the warning area. These conditions are expected to spread over the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico later today and tonight. Hurricane conditions are also possible for the Virgin Islands, Vieques, and Culebra this evening into tonight. Winds could cause significant damage, including to roofing and siding materials, and result in scattered power and communication outages.

Storm Surge: A storm surge is projected to raise water levels by 1 to 3 feet above ground level along the eastern coast of Puerto Rico from San Juan to Guayama, including Culebra and Vieques, as well as in the U.S. Virgin Islands, including St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix. The British Virgin Islands may see similar surges of 1 to 3 feet above normal tide levels. This surge will be accompanied by large and destructive waves near the coast.

Surf: Swells generated by Ernesto are currently impacting parts of the Leeward Islands and Virgin Islands, and are expected to spread to Puerto Rico later today. These swells will reach the Dominican Republic tonight, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and southeastern Bahamas on Wednesday, and Bermuda by Thursday, causing life-threatening surf and rip current conditions.

Residents are advised to finalize preparatory measures for a potential direct or indirect impact from this system and to stay informed through official channels for further updates. The National Weather Service (NWS) will continue to monitor the situation and provide updates as necessary. The next briefing is scheduled for 5:00 PM AST Tuesday, August 13, 2024, or sooner if necessary.