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Atlantic Hurricane Season Opens With Below-Normal Forecast, but Caribbean Still Faces 35% Major Landfall Risk

NOAA projects a below-normal 2026 Atlantic season with 8 to 14 named storms, while Colorado State forecasts 13 named storms and a 35 percent Caribbean major hurricane landfall risk, reminding Virgin Islanders that even one storm can define a season.

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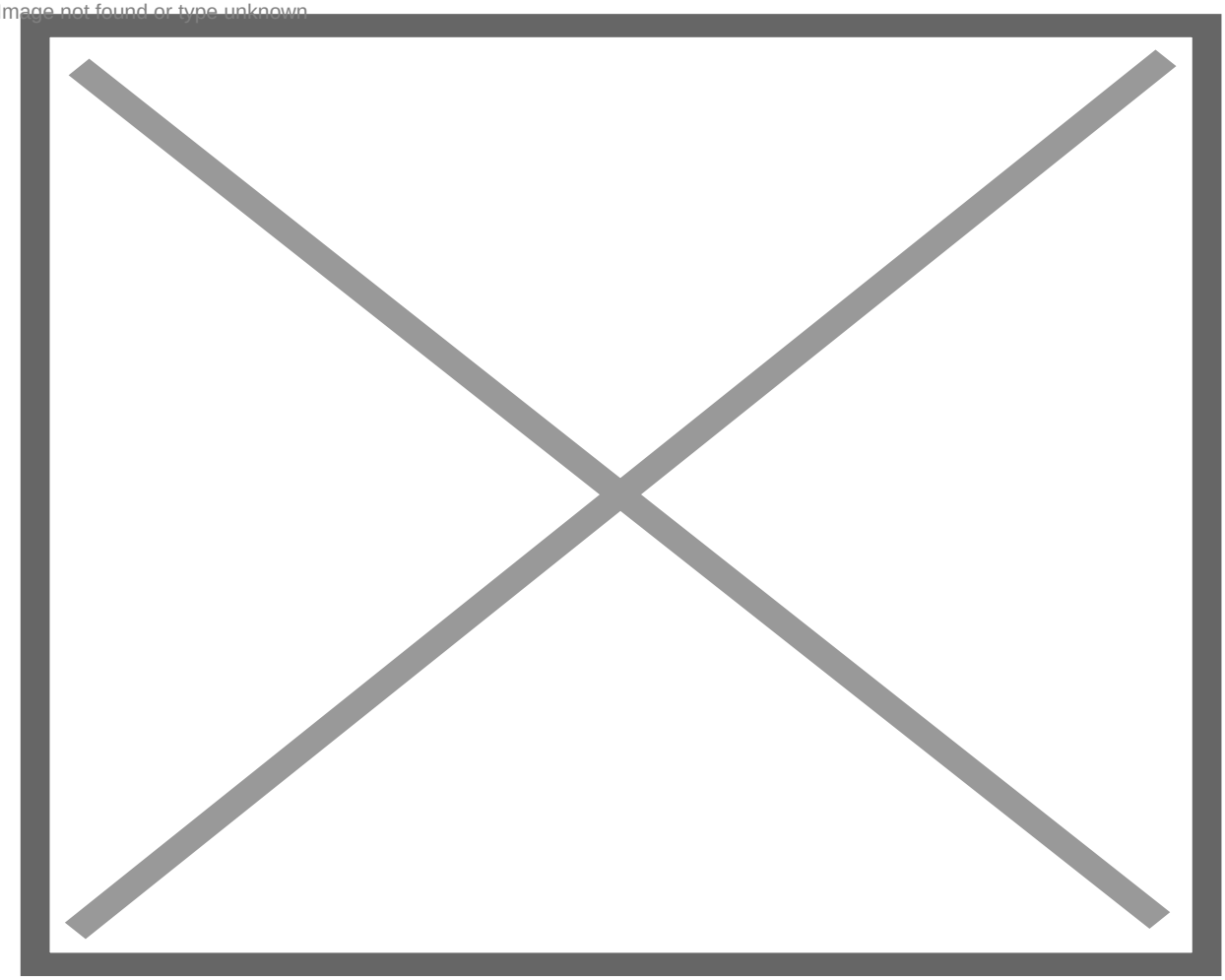

The 2026 Atlantic hurricane season begins today with forecasters calling for a quieter-than-usual year, but federal and university outlooks continue to stress a point familiar to the Caribbean and the U.S. Virgin Islands: even a below-normal season can produce one storm capable of changing lives, damaging infrastructure and disrupting entire communities.

The Atlantic hurricane season officially runs from June 1 through November 30. As of early Monday, the National Hurricane Center reported no tropical cyclones in the Atlantic, giving residents across the region a quiet opening to the season. However, forecasters are cautioning against allowing the lower seasonal outlook to create complacency.

NOAA's Climate Prediction Center is forecasting a 55 percent chance of a below-normal Atlantic hurricane season, a 35 percent chance of a near-normal season and a 10 percent chance of an above-normal season. The agency's outlook calls for 8 to 14 named storms, 3 to 6 hurricanes and 1 to 3 major hurricanes, meaning storms reaching Category 3 strength or higher.

Those projections are below the 1991–2020 seasonal averages of 14 named storms, 7 hurricanes and 3 major hurricanes. NOAA said most of the expected activity is likely to occur during August, September and October, the peak months of the season.

The main driver behind the more restrained outlook is the expected development of El Niño conditions during the season. El Niño typically increases upper-level winds across portions of the Atlantic basin, including the Caribbean and tropical Atlantic, creating vertical wind shear that makes it harder for tropical systems to form and strengthen.

Still, NOAA cautioned that seasonal outlooks do not predict where storms will form, how strong any individual storm will become, or whether a particular island, territory or coastline will be affected. Those outcomes depend on daily weather patterns that cannot be reliably predicted months in advance.

Colorado State University's Tropical Cyclones, Radar, Atmospheric Modeling, and Software Team is also forecasting a somewhat below-normal season. As previously reported by the V.I. Consortium, CSU's initial 2026 outlook projects 13 named storms, six hurricanes and two major hurricanes.

For the Caribbean, the CSU forecast remains significant despite the lower overall numbers. The university's team estimated a 35 percent chance that the Caribbean will experience a major hurricane landfall this season. That figure is lower than the long-term average, but it still represents a meaningful risk for a region where exposure is high and preparation windows can be short.

CSU researchers said the expected transition from weak La Niña conditions to El Niño is a major reason for the lower activity forecast. The team also noted that sea surface temperatures in the western tropical Atlantic are warmer than normal, while the eastern and central tropical Atlantic are slightly cooler than normal. That combination helps explain why forecasters are not calling for a highly active season, while still warning that storm risk remains.

For the U.S. Virgin Islands, the start of hurricane season brings the annual urgency of reviewing household plans, securing property, checking insurance documents, preparing emergency supplies, and making sure families know how they will communicate if power, water, internet or cellular service is interrupted.

The territory's exposure is not limited to direct hurricane landfalls. Tropical storms and nearby hurricanes can still produce damaging winds, flooding rain, dangerous surf, rough seas and extended utility disruptions. For residents in low-lying, flood-prone or coastal areas, the difference between a storm passing directly over the territory and one passing nearby may still be significant enough to require early action.

NOAA and the National Weather Service recommend that residents assemble disaster supplies before storms threaten, including enough food, water and medicine for each person for at least three days. Officials also recommend flashlights, batteries, phone chargers, a battery-powered or hand-crank radio, cash, fuel and other basic supplies needed to get through both the storm and the aftermath.

The National Hurricane Center also urges residents to understand hurricane hazards before a storm is approaching. Those hazards include wind, flooding rain, storm surge, rough surf and rip currents. For island communities, marine conditions and coastal flooding can become dangerous even when the center of a storm remains away from land.

The 2026 outlook offers some encouraging signs compared with more active years, but it does not remove the need for preparation. The Caribbean’s history shows that seasonal totals matter less to affected communities than the track, strength and timing of the storm that comes closest.