

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Hurricane Season Starts Today: Here's What You Should Know

Hurricane Season / **Published On June 01, 2021 05:44 AM /**

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A gas station in St. Thomas devastated by Hurricane Irma in 2017

It's June 1, the start of the 2021 hurricane season and all respected firms both [government](#) and [private](#) that specialize in weather patterns are predicting an above-normal season. With Hurricanes Irma and Maria — the deadly and ravaging storms of 2017 still fresh in the minds of Virgin Islanders — we've included in this article important information from the local government, as well as details from this year's weather projections.

NOAA, CSU Prediction

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, on May 20 predicted [another above-normal](#) Atlantic hurricane season. Forecasters are predicting a 60 percent chance of an above-normal season, a 30 percent chance of a near-normal season, and a 10 percent chance of a below-normal season. However, experts do not anticipate the historic level of storm activity seen in 2020.

For 2021, a likely range of 13 to 20 named storms (winds of 39 mph or higher), of which 6 to 10 could become hurricanes (winds of 74 mph or higher), including 3 to 5 major hurricanes (category 3, 4 or 5; with winds of 111 mph or higher) is expected. NOAA said it provides these ranges with a 70 percent confidence. The Atlantic hurricane season extends from June 1 through November 30.

"Now is the time for communities along the coastline as well as inland to get prepared for the dangers that hurricanes can bring," said Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo. "The experts at NOAA are poised to deliver life-saving early warnings and forecasts to communities, which will also help minimize the economic impacts of storms."

A month earlier, Colorado State University (CSU) hurricane researchers [predicted an above-average Atlantic hurricane season in 2021](#), with the university citing the likely absence of El Niño as a primary factor. CSU said Tropical Atlantic sea surface temperatures are near their long-term averages, while subtropical Atlantic sea surface temperatures are much warmer than their long-term average values. The warmer subtropical Atlantic also favors an active 2021 Atlantic hurricane season.

According to CSU, the tropical Pacific currently has weak La Niña conditions, that is, water temperatures are somewhat cooler than normal in the eastern and central tropical Pacific. While these waters may warm slightly during the next few months, CSU said it does not currently anticipate El Niño for the peak of the Atlantic hurricane season. El Niño tends to increase upper-level westerly winds across the Caribbean into the tropical Atlantic, tearing apart hurricanes as they try to form.

VITEMA Scores itself 8 out of 10 relative to Preparedness

During a Senate hearing [last week](#), the local emergency management agency head, Daryl Jaschen, said, "The staff is versed, we've gone through several preparation events, we've gone through hurricanes ourselves," he said. Mr. Jaschen explained that the agency had purchased ten 100 kilowatt generators with CARES Act funds that were deployed on St. Thomas and St. Croix, with two additional units heading to St. John soon.

VITEMA's Deputy Director of Logistics, Steve DeBlasio, added that there were two light towers purchased for each island. He then broke down the number of pre-stationed meals and water on each of the following islands: On St. Thomas there were 100,800 meals and 420,936 liters of waters as of Tuesday; on St. Croix there were 107,512 meals and 410,400 liters of water; and on St John there were 15,000 meals and 43,200 liters of water. On all three islands there was availability of tarps and plastic sheeting that can be utilized to cover entire homes, Mr. DeBlasio said.

V.I. Dept. of Human Services Concerned About Employee and Shelter Shortages

Kimberley Causey-Gomez, the D.H.S. commissioner, expressed during the same hearing last week that D.H.S. was prepared as it could be with the resources it has. "I know that we are short staffed, I know our facilities are comprised, I know I have a lot of concern about our two homes for the aged as far as that is concerned. Even though I am working towards a long-term solution, I am concerned about those facilities, the staff, and the residents. For us, making sure we plan and have an effective way of managing that in the event that something happens is, I think, the most important thing for us to do," she said before rating her department's preparedness 7 out of 10.

Ms. Causey-Gomez also identified the following hurricane shelters in the event of a storm:

- Educational Complex High School, St. Croix
- D. C. Canegata Recreation Center, St. Croix
- Bertha C. Boschulte School, St. Thomas
- Lockhart Elementary School, St. Thomas
- Gift Hill School, St. John (currently working on negotiations)
- George Simmons/Adrian Senior Center, St. John
- Firehouse Community Center, Water Island

The D.H.S. commissioner further stated, "We are still open to other viable community shelter options. In March 2021, through a press release, the Department of Human Services requested the business and non-profit community to partner with us for shelter operations."

D.H.S. as of last week was still conducting inspections on secondary evacuation centers, and Ms. Causey-Gomez expected those locations to be finalized in the next week or two.

She also spoke of the changes to shelters as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, as those facilities' capacities have been diminished. "The differences will be your shelter capacities are decreased, your cleaning and operations increased, and you also have pre-screening," she said, responding to a question from Sen. Alma Francis Heyliger during last week's hearing. "This is where I would like to encourage everyone to get vaccinated. That's for your safety as well as everyone else's, especially if you are coming to a shelter."

Sen. Milton Potter asked what would happen if someone seeking shelter were to come in with a temperature that is deemed too high. Ms. Causey-Gomez said, “I’m going to find a space for you and make sure you are separated from the other parts of the population.”

The D.H.S. commissioner added that the department has been looking into the possibility of doing rapid Covid-19 testing at the shelters. She acknowledged that there was no way to mandate vaccinations for people seeking shelter, however, she encouraged residents to get vaccinated.