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Hurricane Sam Intensifies Rapidly, Storm Tracking West Northwest, But Future Path Still Uncertain

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Hurricane Sam is rapidly intensifying and the National Hurricane Center is projecting that the storm — sustaining 85 mph as of 5:00 p.m. Friday — will become a major hurricane by Saturday.

Hurricane-force winds extend outward to 15 miles, and tropical storm-force winds outward to 60 miles.

According to Yale University's Climate Connections, on Monday through Wednesday, Sam may encounter slightly less favorable conditions for intensification, with wind shear rising to a moderate 10-15 knots, and the atmosphere surrounding the storm getting dry, with a mid-level relative humidity of 50%.

Even so, the National Hurricane Center predicts that Sam will become a category 4 storm with 130 mph winds on Sunday and Monday. Sam is a small hurricane, and small storms are more prone to rapid changes in strength, according to Climate Connections.

The hurricane's future track will depend also on how quickly it intensifies. A stronger storm is more likely to feel steering currents aloft that will tug the system farther to the north and miss the Leeward Islands; a weaker and slower-to-organize storm will track farther to the west and potentially pass through the islands, said Yale Connections.

Hurricane Sam is projected to make its closest approach to the USVI on Wednesday afternoon, with the storm's center expected to pass 453 miles east of St. Thomas as a Cat. 3 hurricane.