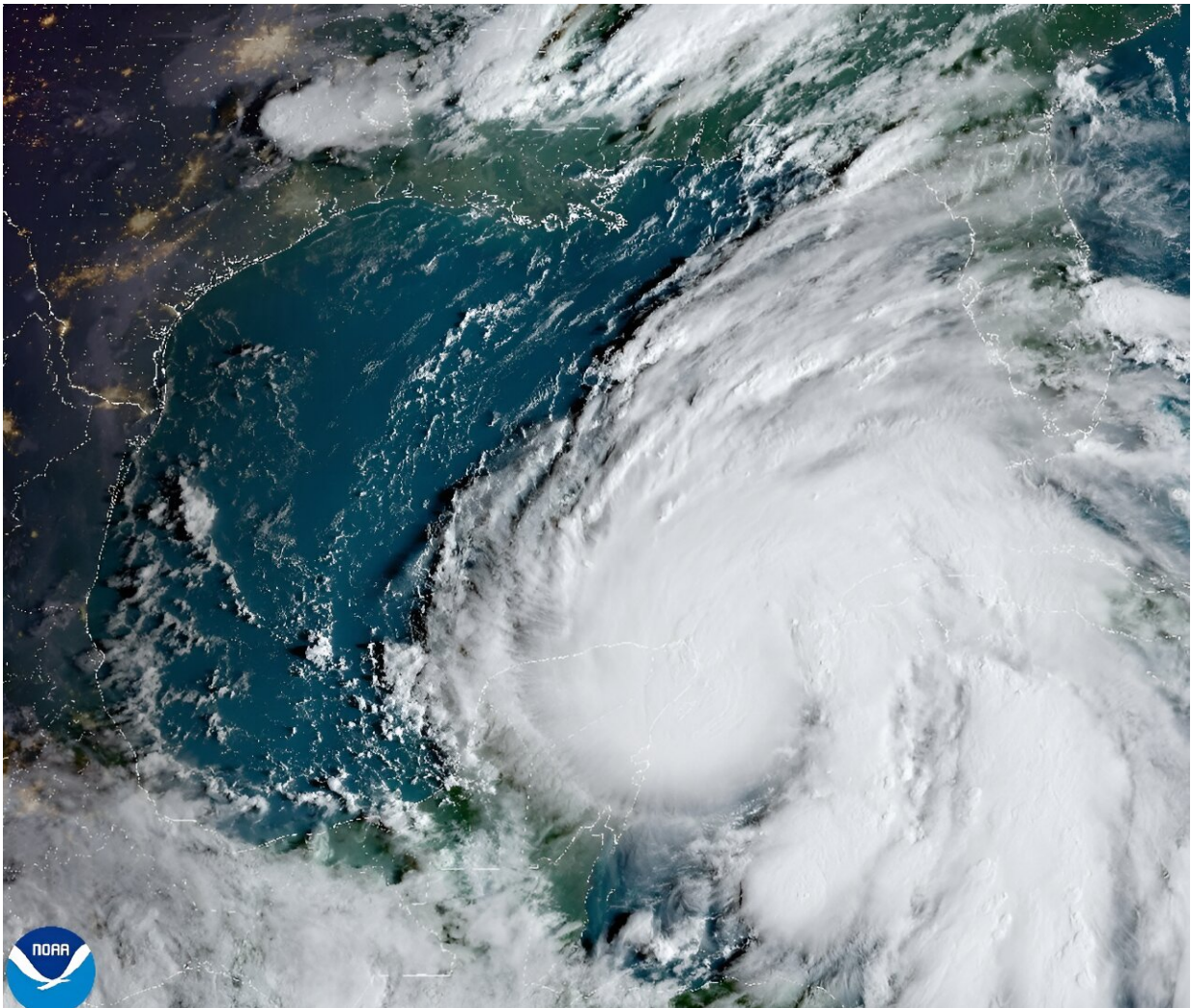


Florida girds for arrival of Helene as powerful hurricane

September 25 2024, by Gianrigo MARLETTA



This image from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows Tropical Storm Helene on September 25, 2024, as it move away from Mexico and bears down on the US state of Florida, where it is forecast to hit as a

powerful hurricane.

Thousands of residents on Wednesday began evacuating parts of coastal Florida as the US state braces for Hurricane Helene, forecast to barrel ashore as a powerful, potentially deadly storm.

Helene strengthened into a hurricane mid-morning in the Gulf of Mexico and is "expected to bring life-threatening storm surge, damaging winds, and flooding rains to a large portion of Florida and the Southeastern United States," the National Hurricane Center in Miami said in its latest bulletin.

Maximum sustained winds have increased to near 80 miles (130 kilometers) per hour with higher gusts. "Additional strengthening is forecast, and Helene is expected to be a [major hurricane](#) when it reaches the Florida Big Bend coast Thursday evening," the NHC added.

Governor Ron DeSantis has issued a state of emergency for nearly all of Florida's 67 counties, mobilized the National Guard and positioned thousands of personnel ahead of possible search and rescue, power restoration and road clearing operations.

After brushing Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, home to multiple tourist hotspots including Cancun, Helene could roar ashore as a major Category 3 or even more powerful Category 4 hurricane, on the five-level Saffir-Simpson scale, the Florida Division of Emergency Management warned.

Ten Florida counties have announced mandatory partial evacuation orders, while two have ordered the evacuation of all residents. DeSantis said at least 12 [health care facilities](#), from hospitals to nursing homes,

have already begun evacuations and more are expected to follow.

Whole state bracing

"You're going to have impacts of this storm... really all across the Florida peninsula," DeSantis told a press conference in Tampa.

While he said a "direct impact" was likely in the Tallahassee region, communities across a wide swath of northwest Florida—including Tampa Bay, an area of more than three million residents—faced the dangerous threats of storm surge, heavy rain and fierce winds.



Heavy rains from Hurricane Helene fall over Cancun, Mexico, on September 24, 2024.

In St. Petersburg, adjacent to Tampa, long lines of cars were seen at multiple centers where sand was being distributed for people to fill sandbags.

Teacher Lorraine Major, seen making her own preparations, has lived in Florida her whole life. "You get used to it," she said of the multiple storms and hurricanes that batter her state every year.

"But these last couple of years, the hurricanes are getting really, really bad," the 44-year-old told AFP.

Hurricane warnings have already been announced for a 250-mile stretch of coastline, essentially from just north of Tampa to just shy of Panama City, on the Florida panhandle.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has warned storm surges could reach as high as 10 to 15 feet (three to 4.5 meters).

If forecasts are confirmed, Helene could bring sustained winds of more than 110 miles per hour—making it potentially the most powerful hurricane to hit the United States in more than a year.

Hurricane Idalia, a Category 3 [storm](#), hit northwestern Florida in August 2023.

"This does have the potential to exceed that," DeSantis said of Helene.

The 2024 Atlantic hurricane season, which began on June 1 and will end on November 30, has been less busy than expected.

Researchers say climate change likely plays a role in the rapid

intensification of storms, because there is more energy in a warmer ocean for them to feed on.

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