

US Gulf Coast still devastated six months after Hurricane Michael

By Matthew Taylor
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Six months after Hurricane Michael made landfall on the Gulf coast of Florida as a category four storm, the region is still in shambles and many of the remaining residents are homeless and desperate.

Michael was the fourth strongest hurricane ever to impact the continental US. In terms of sustained wind speed, it was the most powerful to hit the US since Hurricane Andrew devastated south Florida in 1992.

Fifty-seven US deaths have been attributed to the storm, with an additional 17 deaths in Central America. Overall, some \$25.1 billion in damages were inflicted by the hurricane. Mexico City, Panama City and surrounding communities were destroyed, with some areas seeing all houses, businesses and other structures leveled by the storm's winds.

The impact was aggravated by its rapid intensification. First identified by meteorologists as a tropical depression on October 7, it grew into a major hurricane within two days, making landfall on October 10. The speed with which it developed made evacuation impossible for most residents, many of whom lacked the means to flee the storm in the first place.

Congress has yet to pass a disaster relief funding bill to address the long-term impact of Hurricane Michael, so residents affected have had to rely upon the meager assistance provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), along with charitable donations, which have totaled approximately \$35 million so far. This compares unfavorably to the \$64.3 million donated in the wake of Hurricane Florence, which impacted the Carolinas a month earlier, and the \$97 million donated after Hurricane Irma, which hit Florida a year earlier but did less overall damage.

A recent report in the *Washington Post* described the living conditions the remaining residents have faced

and the lack of effective aid from the state or federal government.

Tent cities have cropped up throughout the area, as residents who remain compete with the influx of construction workers for rental properties, whose prices have risen significantly since recovery began. Some have remained in their storm-damaged homes, having no other alternative.

One family discussed in the *Post* article opened its five-acre property for homeless families to set up tents. It also took one family, including a six-month-old infant, into its home.

The *Post* reports that FEMA has spent only \$1.1 billion thus far on recovery efforts related to Michael, with most of that sum in the form of Small Business Administration loans. Only \$141 million has been directly disbursed to 31,000 individual households.

FEMA also recently evicted most of the 283 families who had been granted trailers by the agency as temporary living quarters. In spite of efforts by state officials to extend the assistance, only 17 families qualified for a 60-day extension, leaving approximately 800 people without housing last week.

Many area residents quoted in the article said they believed their geographic isolation, in a relatively sparsely populated area, had contributed to an apathetic response on the part of both the government and charitable organizations.

There is some truth to this. In recent years, the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, fed by a warming climate, have increased. Hurricane Michael was the seventh hurricane of 2018, and it was sandwiched in between Hurricane Florence a month earlier and the California wildfires the following month.

Had Hurricane Michael turned east and made landfall

in Tampa Bay instead of the Florida Panhandle, it would have had the potential of becoming the most destructive storm in US history. At least 2,000 people would have died, according to a study conducted eight years ago by the Florida Regional Planning Council.

The council analyzed the impact a category five hurricane would have on the Tampa area. In addition to the casualties, a storm of that magnitude would destroy at least half a million homes and 10,000 businesses, and a potential 26-foot storm surge would flood both Tampa Bay and St. Petersburg, collectively home to over three million people.

The study had one major flaw, however. It estimated a five-day window between initial formation and landfall. It assumed that this time period would allow for the evacuation of a large number of residents. For Hurricane Michael, however, this window was shortened to 73 hours.

This demonstrates the dilemma facing those in areas affected by tropical storms. They know from past experience that they cannot rely upon the government for effective assistance in the event of a hurricane, neither for evacuation in advance or recovery in the aftermath. And they now face storms whose destructive potential grows unpredictably from season to season, fueled by a rapidly warming climate, itself the result of the irrational management of the world's resources under capitalism.

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