

A Primer of Hurricane Terminology

Hurricanes are tropical cyclones in which winds reach constant speeds of 74 miles per hour or more and blow in a large spiral around a relatively calm center called the eye.

A band of high-velocity winds extends outward 20 or 30 miles from the rim of the eye, and winds may gust to more than 200 miles per hour as they approach it.

Hurricane winds do their share of harm, but they cause the greatest damage when dumping water on the areas over which they move. As storms move across the coastline, they create huge waves and storm tides which may reach 25 feet or more above normal. As winds diminish, the torrential rainfall normally accompanying the hurricane strikes. Drownings are the most common fatalities associated with hurricanes.

The following terms are associated with hurricane activity:

Tropical cyclone: The general term for all rotating storms originating over tropical waters.

Tropical disturbance: A moving area of thunderstorms in the tropics that maintains its identity for 24 hours or more.

Tropical depression: Rotary circulation at surface, highest constant wind speed 38 miles per hour (33 knots).

Tropical storm: Distinct rotary circulation, constant wind speed ratings from 39 to 73 miles per hour (34 to 63 knots).

Gale warnings: Issued when winds of 39 to 54 miles an hour (34 to 47 knots) are expected.

Storm warnings: Issued when winds of 55 to 73 miles an hour (48 to 63 knots) are expected. If a hurricane is expected to strike a coastal area, gale or storm warnings will not usually precede hurricane warnings.

Hurricane watch: Issued for a coastal area when there is a threat of hurricane conditions within 24 to 36 hours.

Hurricane warning: Issued when hurricane conditions are expected in a specified coastal area in 24 hours or less. Hurricane conditions include winds of 74 miles an hour (64 knots) or more and dangerously high tides and waves. Actions for protection of life and property should begin immediately when the warning is issued.

Flash flood watch: A flash flood is possible in the area. Stay alert.

Flash flood warning: A flash flood is imminent. Take immediate action.

Tornados: Sometimes spawned by hurricanes, these violently rotating columns of air may produce severe damage and casualties. The typical path of a tornado is 50 feet wide and a few miles long, but some have cut a path much larger. If a tornado is reported in your area, a warning will be issued.

Contraflow: Contraflow or lane reversal is utilized during mass evacuations on major limited or controlled access highways to reduce the duration of an evacuation by opening up all lanes in one direction.

Voluntary evacuation: A warning to persons within a designated area that a threat to life and property exists or is likely to exist in the immediate future. Individuals issued this type of warning or orders are NOT required to evacuate, however it would be to their advantage to do so.

Mandatory evacuation: This is a warning to persons within the designated area that an imminent threat to life and property exists and individuals MUST evacuate in accordance with the instructions of local officials.