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In North Carolina, Less Than Dread as Storm Lopes Northward



Randall Hill/Reuters

Mark and Denise Flanders, with their daughter Verity, said they might leave Ocean Isle Beach, N.C., early if Hurricane Irene kicked up stormy weather.

By SHANNAN BOWEN and TIMOTHY WILLIAMS
Published: August 24, 2011

WILMINGTON, N.C. — In this coastal city, which could be in the path of a hurricane that could arrive this weekend, many people were not in much of a disaster preparedness mood on Wednesday.

On this perfect day — sunny with a light wind — Bill Viego, a plumber who lives six miles from shore, was catching red drum at Wrightsville Beach. A resident of Wilmington since 1972, he has seen them all — Fran, Bertha and Floyd — and escaped with neither damage nor harm.

“You’ve got to take hurricanes with respect,” he said. “I’m not a fool, but I’m not packing up and running every time one comes.”

In the din of news conferences and official statements, there is a palpable sense of urgency, but this port city has seen its share of hurricanes over the years, and many residents are less cautious.

For the past two days, local, state and federal officials — among them, Bev Perdue, governor of North Carolina, and W. Craig Fugate, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency — have urged the residents to stock up on food and supplies, and take the threat of Hurricane

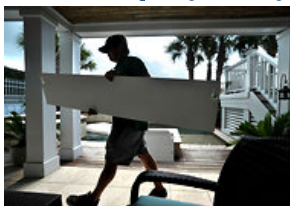
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Sam Crittenden prepared for the storm in Wrightsville Beach.

Irene — which was ravaging the Bahamas on Wednesday — with great caution.

The storm, [now classified as a Category 3 hurricane](#), could make landfall in eastern North Carolina on Saturday, according to the National Hurricane Center in Miami. “It may get a little stronger over the next day or two,” said Dennis Feltgen, a spokesman for the National Hurricane Center.

As it moves over the Bahamas, the storm may head more northwest, which would put it roughly in line with the North Carolina coast, forecasters said, and nearly every state along the East Coast would be affected.

At a news conference on Wednesday morning, Governor Perdue said her oft-repeated message was aimed specifically at people in eastern North Carolina: “We want folks there to take this storm seriously.”

But it is the height of vacation season here, and, hurricane or no, some people have preferred not to interrupt their summer breaks and leisure activities, even finding natural disasters part of the appeal.

Surfers on Wrightsville Beach have been watching the weather reports closely. If the hurricane continues to steer east of the coast, it creates a good swell, optimal surfing conditions. But if the storm comes closer, the surf will be “windy and disorganized,” said Michael Casper, 16, an employee of Sweetwater Surf Shop in Wrightsville Beach.

The shop canceled surfing lessons for the weekend and decided not to rent boards, an effort to prevent novice surfers from taking a chance in what he calls “victory at sea,” meaning “when sea is so wild there’s nothing you can do and you can’t really be in it,” he said.

Ellen Thompson, 74, who works in a gift shop at the beach and lives a few miles away, said she enjoyed “Mother Nature” — including severe storms.

“I’ve been through Fran,” she said. “I’ve been through them all. They’re exciting to me.”

Others, though, were dutifully taking a more cautious approach.

One Wal-Mart reported selling out of bottled water, and other stores were without generators and weather radios. Various outdoor events — high school football games, concerts and farmers markets — had been called off.

At Island Tackle and Hardware in Carolina Beach, N.C., people were picking up rope and plywood to board up windows and filling propane tanks.

Dennis Barbour, the shop owner, was discussing the 1996 hurricane season, when Hurricanes Bertha and Fran hit the region.

“Personally, I’m checking my generator at home,” said Mr. Barbour, a former mayor of Carolina Beach who has lived there for 45 years. “We have a generator at the store.”

“It doesn’t bother me to be overprepared and not get much of a blow,” he said.

And as the first day of classes began on Wednesday at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, school officials advised students to make evacuation plans, especially if their families lived more than four hours away.

Erin Danneker, 18, a freshman, and her sister Megan Danneker, 21, a senior, discussed the looming hurricane as they signed up for meal plans. Much of the chatter on campus revolved around the hurricane.

“We don’t want anything bad to happen,” Megan Danneker said, “but we really want classes to be canceled.”



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The New York Times

Shannan Bowen of the Star-News reported from Wilmington, N.C., and Timothy Williams from New York.

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