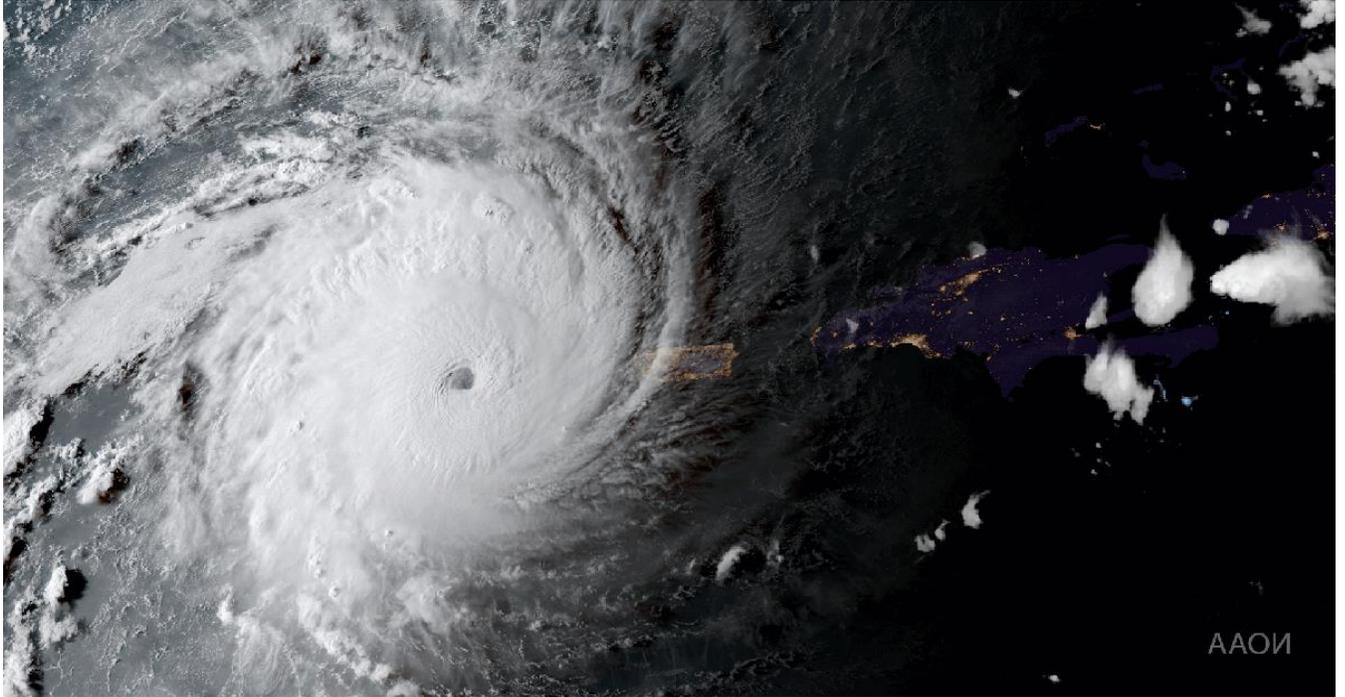


Harvey, Irma, Maria and Nate are off the hurricane name list; forecast for 2018 season still subject to change

- By JOHN BOYER Richmond Times-Dispatch April 13, 2018



Satellite image of Hurricane Irma at peak strength over the Leeward Islands on the morning of Sept. 6, 2017. Sustained winds of 185 mph swirled around the eye, which tied for the second-highest in any hurricane in the Atlantic basin.
NOAA

The names Harvey, Irma, Maria and Nate will never again be used for Atlantic hurricanes because of the devastation those storms caused in the 2017 season.

On Thursday, a committee of the World Meteorological Organization decided to replace those names with Harold, Idalia, Margot and Nigel when the list is recycled in 2023.

The nations hit by a storm can request to have a name removed if it would be traumatic for it to appear again, and the 2017 season left few corners of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico unscathed.

The flooding from Hurricane Harvey was nothing short of catastrophic in southeastern Texas and southwestern Louisiana because the large storm stalled for days in late August. The 60.58-inch (or 5-foot) rainfall total in Nederland, Texas, broke the record for heaviest hurricane rainfall measurement in U.S. history by 8 inches.

Hurricane Irma's Category 5 winds of nearly 180 mph leveled buildings and vegetation in the Leeward Islands in early September, then ended with a destructive combination of waves, storm surge, rain and tornadoes across Florida.

Life in Puerto Rico is still far from normal after a worst-case scenario strike from Hurricane Maria in mid-September. The storm was blamed for at least 100 direct deaths between Dominica in the Leeward Islands and Puerto Rico, but the number of indirect deaths due to the massive disruption is still unknown.

In early October, flooding from then-Tropical Storm Nate claimed about 45 lives in Central America. Nate proceeded north to hit the central U.S. Gulf Coast as a Category 1 hurricane and brought minor rainfall to Virginia.

The National Hurricane Center concluded that Harvey and Maria will likely rank as the second-costliest and third-costliest storms in U.S. history, respectively, with 2005's Katrina still the highest (accounting for inflation).

An uneasy, uncertain eye toward the 2018 season

It's too early to know exactly what will transpire during the hurricane season that runs from June 1 to Nov. 30, but a handful of outlooks released this spring predict more than the average number of storms.

That news earned some ominous and sensational headlines online, but what will ultimately happen on land remains a mystery whether there are many storms or just a few.

Hurricane activity in the Atlantic could be bolstered or stymied depending on the Pacific's El Niño-La Niña cycle, and the eventual state of it during late summer is notoriously difficult to predict in mid-spring.

One of the few things we know for sure is that the first storm to develop will take the name Alberto.

Sandy was stricken after its disastrous impact in the 2012 season, so if we manage to get to the "S" storm this year, it will be called Sara, instead.

The complete Atlantic name list for 2018 is:

Alberto, Beryl, Chris, Debby, Ernesto, Florence, Gordon, Helene, Isaac, Joyce, Kirk, Leslie, Michael, Nadine, Oscar, Patty, Rafael, Sara, Tony, Valerie and William.

How naming works

For Atlantic tropical systems, the six annually rotating lists are stocked with alternating male and female names for every letter except Q, U, X, Y and Z.

The practice of naming Atlantic hurricanes dates back to the 1950s, though only female names were used between 1953 and 1978.

Since 1953, 86 hurricanes and tropical storms have caused enough devastation to be removed from the Atlantic lists.

Notable examples that affected Virginia include:

Hazel (1954), Connie and Diane (1955), Camille (1969), Agnes (1972), Fran (1996), Floyd (1999), Isabel (2003), Ivan (2004), Irene (2011) and Matthew (2016).

Gaston, however, remains on the active list despite causing eight deaths and extensive flash flood damage in central Virginia on Aug. 30, 2004.

That is likely because the wide scale of death and destruction from the hurricanes retired after the 2004 season — Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne — far exceeded the very localized severity of Gaston.

The 2016 iteration of Gaston reached Category 3 strength but tracked far away from land and caused no deaths or injuries. The name could be used again in 2022.

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