Deadly New Orleans area tornado given preliminary EF3 rating

A massive tornado struck parts of New Orleans that were devastated by Hurricane Katrina nearly two decades ago. A nearby suburb was hardest hit with more than 12,000 structures damaged.

By Adriana Navarro, AccuWeather staff writer & Allison Finch, AccuWeather staff writer

Damage surveys and cleanup operations were underway Wednesday around New Orleans after a ferocious tornado rampaged through the city's Lower 9th Ward and several suburban communities late Tuesday.

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards declared a state of emergency Wednesday afternoon following the destruction across St. Bernard, Orleans, Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes Tuesday evening. This included areas that had been heavily impacted by Hurricane Katrina -- though where many continued to live -- and Hurricane Ida, according to state officials.

"Unfortunately, our people have become all too familiar with rebuilding after tragedy and loss, but it is never easy," the governor said Wednesday over Twitter.

A large tornado, rated EF3 strength, tore through the New Orleans metropolitan area late Tuesday evening, ripping roofs off homes, flipping cars, killing at least one person and injuring multiple others as severe weather continued to push through the South.

Just after 7 p.m. CDT, the ominous dark clouds and funnel were spotted in the area, prompting people in a city generally without basements to look for shelter elsewhere. Photos of the aftermath showed debris scattered, vehicles overturned and wires torn down in an area that had been badly damaged by Hurricane Katrina nearly two decades earlier and Hurricane Ida just last year.

As many as 12,550 structures were damaged in the suburb of Arabi and New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward as the powerful tornado slammed the city, according to Stephen Strader, an assistant professor in the department of geography and environment at Villanova University. There were reports of people trapped inside bathrooms in their homes after taking cover, according to St. Bernard Parish President Guy McInnis.

"To see [the areas damaged] looks like a model town where someone just walked in and stepped on some houses. Literally, match sticks that have been strewn around," U.S. Rep. of Louisiana Troy Carter told AccuWeather National Reporter Jillian Angeline on Wednesday. "Unfortunately, this was not a toy model. This was people's communities and people's homes and it was quite devastating."

He added that Wednesday had been "equally bad" as after any of the other storms the state has endured, "perhaps even worse" since at least with hurricanes, people have an opportunity to evacuate.

McInnis said that at least one person was killed by the tornado in Arabi, according to NOLA.com.

The victim was identified as Connor Lambert, a 25-year-old resident of Arabi who had just had dinner with his parents and had been on his way home when the storm struck. The St. Bernard Parish coroner's office said he died of multiple blunt-force injuries, according to the AP.

(Twitter/@nolaready)

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Damage in St. Bernard Parish following the tornadoes that hit Louisiana on March 22, 2022. (Twitter/@nolaready)

Claudette Reuther, a St. Bernard Parish resident who spoke with Angeline, described the tornado as a “horrendous experience.”

“We’re both on the floor and it lasted probably a minute or two. It wasn’t real long, but at the same time it feels like it was forever. It was a horrendous experience,” Reuther said. “You could feel the whole home vibrating and you hear this constant roar noise. And then all of a sudden literally everything just went silent, complete dead.”

Michelle Malasovich lives in Arabi, and she was initially worried about her family that lives in areas north of Louisiana that were also receiving severe weather. She told The Associated Press she was texting her family when "all of a sudden the lights started flickering."

Her husband, who was out on the porch, saw the tornado coming.

"It just kept getting louder and louder," said Malasovich. After the storm passed, Malasovich and her husband came out to assess the damage. "Our neighbor's house is in the middle of the street right now."

The AP also reported that there was a strong smell of natural gas in Arabi in the aftermath of the twister.

AccuWeather.com radar shows two severe thunderstorms with associated hook echos, which can be a sign of tornadoes, on the night of March 22, 2022.

Carter said that an additional round of federal resources for disaster recovery had just been announced Tuesday ahead of the storms, designating another $1.27 billion in federal resources to assist the state with recovery from Ida, with another $4.6 billion going to Baton Rouge and $450 million to Lake Charles -- areas that had been impacted by hurricanes Delta and Laura.

"And now here we are today, starting on yet a whole new discussion of resources for people who were unfortunately still building from previous storms who find themselves now in the throes of a very quick-moving tornado," Carter said.

The Louisiana Office of State Fire Marshal said on Twitter that search and rescues teams were working through the night and into Wednesday to ensure there are no individuals trapped in areas ravaged by the tornadoes. Officials said crews will also conduct generator safety checks since many were without power.

The National Weather Service said Wednesday morning that at least two tornadoes had been confirmed in the region. One of the twisters tore through New Orleans East communities and the Lower 9th Ward, and another in the community of Lacombe, located across Lake Pontchartrain to the north of New Orleans. The most heavily concentrated damage was in Arabi.

Storm survey teams were dispatched Wednesday morning to Arabi and the Lower 9th Ward to determine the tornado's strength. Preliminary reports have found damage consistent with at least an EF3 tornado, the NWS said. Survey teams found later on Wednesday that the tornado's path measured approximately 11 miles, extending from around Gretna in Jefferson Parish, to Arabi in St. Bernard Parish and then to New Orleans East. The damage was

noted to be most intense in Arabi. The storm survey teams will continue to study the damaged areas to determine a final assessment in the coming days. Crews were also expected to survey damage in the nearby cities of Gretna and Lacombe.

On Wednesday, 300 National Guard personnel were activated in Louisiana to assist St. Bernard Parish with route clearance, engineering support and security, according to the AP.

“One of the things we know, is that in the City of New Orleans, we are resilient people,” New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell said in a press conference on Wednesday afternoon. “We know that we are also on the frontlines of climate change and this is just another example of that. My team, my administration has responded to over 15 emergency declarations in the less than four years and it has been the response of the public that has truly gotten us through them.”

The Big Easy is no stranger to tornadoes. At least 7 significant (EF2 or stronger) twisters have crisscrossed Orleans Parish since 1950, according to the Tornado Archive.

"This week's tornado's rating of 160 mph is 10 mph stronger than the rating for the 2017 EF3 tornado that hit nearby, and the two twisters crossed paths on Cardenas Drive," said AccuWeather senior weather editor Jesse Ferrell. "This week's tornado path," he added, "was also less than a mile east of the 1953 F2 tornado which took a similar northeast path."

A tornado touched down in the New Orleans area, Louisiana, on March 22. (Preston Trahan via Storyful)

(Preston Trahan via Storyful)

The tornadoes and the associated storm were a part of the same system that hit parts of Texas and other South Central states this week, meaning that at least two deaths were associated with the storms. Between Monday and Tuesday, 38 tornadoes were confirmed during the outbreak, with surveys continuing through Wednesday.

Over 60 tornado warnings were issued across Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana on Monday alone, but the storms hit Texas the hardest that day. At least one fatality and over two dozen injuries are being blamed on the tornadoes and severe thunderstorms that struck the state. On Wednesday, the Oklahoma Red Cross arrived to distribute supplies to the community of Kingston, where a tornado destroyed or severely damaged at least 70 homes Monday. The organization stated that it "will help families start the process

of recovering."

The storms didn't let up Tuesday as they moved deeper into Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. At one point, nearly 100,000 customers across Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas were without power on Tuesday, according to PowerOutage.US. In Holmes County, Mississippi, the damage from the storms were evident from local neighborhoods.

Schools across southeastern Louisiana, including schools in New Orleans, switched to online learning or released students from classes early as a result of the severe weather, and the campus police at Mississippi State University in Starkville posted a photo of a tree that had been downed on campus. Power lines had also been downed.

The University of Alabama suspended normal operations through 5 a.m. CDT Wednesday in preparation for the severe weather, and by 5 p.m. CDT, most of Alabama was under a tornado watch.

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While others braced for the oncoming storms, Round Rock, Texas, resident Nancy Smith and her family were picking through the remains of their home on Tuesday, trying to salvage clothes and keepsakes after a tornado had ripped off part of the house's second floor the day prior. While her son and grandson had been in an upstairs room when the tornado had come through, Smith told AccuWeather National Reporter Bill Wadell that everyone was okay.

"For them to be up there and the room's completely gone, yeah, God was watching over us," Smith said.

Williamson County Judge Bill Gravell Jr. said in a press conference Tuesday

that more than 1,000 homes in the county had been damaged or completely destroyed amid the storms.

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Tornado damage near Gilmer, Texas (NWS)

North of Dallas, a National Weather Service (NWS) survey team confirmed that a "significant tornado" impacted the Sherwood Shores community in northern Grayson County. The storm claimed the life of a 73-year-old woman, and 11 other people in the county were injured, according to the NWS.

A confirmed tornado left behind a trail of destruction through Jacksboro, Texas, located northwest of Dallas. While there were no injuries reported, the twister, which later received a preliminary rating of an EF3 tornado with maximum wind speeds reaching between 140 and 150 mph, reportedly damaged Jacksboro Elementary School and Jacksboro High School. No children were injured at either school, according to WFAA.

At least 16 tornadoes have been confirmed in Texas as part of Monday's severe weather outburst.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott visited the city along with Crockett, another community that had been severely damaged by Monday's storms, and signed a disaster declaration for 16 counties impacted by the tornadoes. He said that about 10 people in the Crockett area had been injured by storms, according to the AP.

"We are devastated by the tornadoes that have hit our Texas communities, but remain confident and steadfast in our ability to rebuild together," Abbott said. "Thank you to all emergency responders and members of the

Jacksboro and Crockett communities who have come together to help both neighbors and strangers. As Texans, we have endured great storms before and have built back even stronger, and I have confidence in our ability to do so again."

Storms continued to move eastward Wednesday, moving up into South Carolina, where a tornado was confirmed on the ground via radar in the city of Pickens at 8 p.m. EDT.

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Report a Typo

Published Mar 22, 2022 10:34 AM EDT | Updated Mar 28, 2022 9:44 AM EDT

A young truck driver in Elgin, Texas, was accidentally treated to the ride of his life after he drove directly through the funnel of a damaging EF2 tornado on Monday. Days later, the 16-year-old who was behind the wheel spoke out to local media about his close call with the violent twister.

Just before crossing the road, the tornado destroyed a mobile home, injuring one and sending debris and dust from the house up into the air and across the highway. As the twister churned toward the highway, little was in its path other than a lone red truck and its driver.

The truck, a red 2004 Chevrolet Silverado 1500 driven by a boy named Riley Leon, was quickly enveloped by the twisting winds of the tornado as it crossed the highway in front of storm chaser Brian Emfinger.

As power lines in the path of the tornado sparked and buckled due to the high winds, the truck was shoved over onto its side. With the truck fully on its side, the winds managed to spin the vehicle a full 360 before somehow flipping the truck back onto all four wheels, all while whipping around large debris from the mobile home, trees and power lines.

Leon sounded cool and collected as he recounted the astounding moment on Wednesday morning.

"I wasn't scared like that much," Leon said, according to *Good Morning America*. "But, yeah, it was, like, a shocking moment for me."

Later, in an interview with a local TV station, Leon discussed the brush with disaster, along with what has ensued, in greater detail.

"It happened in the blink of an eye and everything was going fast," Leon said with a smile on his face during an interview with KVUE.

Riley Leon's red pickup truck was thrown on its side before being flipped back onto its four wheels. Leon drove off safely with only minor injuries. (Brian Emfinger)

"I didn't feel it, I didn't [see] it," he said. "Supposedly there were sirens going on, but I didn't hear it .... When I landed on my wheels, my hands just landed on my lap and I saw everything and I was like 'probably nothing happened.'"

But after driving a bit farther, Leon said he finally pulled over to take a look at the truck. There, he saw the numerous scratches, dents and fragments of glass from the shattered windows.

According to Leon, the truck has been owned by his family for more than a decade and was passed down from his father. His brother told KVUE that he recognized the truck right away when he saw the video on Facebook.

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And as for his newfound fame among his peers? The teenager said the viral incident brought on a new nickname.

“They broadcasted the interview at school and that’s when everybody found out,” he said with a laugh. “And that’s when everyone started calling me tornado boy.”

Fellow driver Ruben Briones, who later helped the driver, also said Leon was “in shock” after the event. Briones told KXAN that Leon, who is from Manor, left the damaged truck in Elgin.

Photos of the pummeled vehicle show just how viciously the tornado impacted the truck. Dozens of scratches and dents blanket the entire driver side of the red truck, while a basketball-sized indentation sits just behind the backseat door.

> “He was in shock; he was crying,” said Ruben Briones, who said he helped the driver of the red pickup truck seen flipping over on Highway 290 in Elgin in a widely-circulated video.https://t.co/JNAhRHD9AI
>
> — KXAN News (@KXAN_News) March 23, 2022

“He was in shock, he was crying,” Briones said. “He told me it was scary.”

Commander Aaron Crim of the Elgin Police Department said Leon only suffered minor scrapes and cuts on his left arm.

"I CANNOT believe they drove away like that," Emfinger tweeted, reacting to the dramatic footage he caught.

The driver, whom Emfinger estimated to be a 16- to 17-year-old boy, kept

driving down the road after the unbelievably close encounter with the tornado. Emfinger did stop the truck and give the boy his phone so that he could call his parents, according to reporting from the Fort-Worth Star Telegram.

Leon's newly-coined nickname isn't the only big change to his life since his brush with the tornado.

When asked what he was doing driving in such severe conditions and where he was going, he responded, “I had actually come back from a job interview." And did he get the job? “Thankfully, yes I did [get it]," the teen said. "I start on Monday.”

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