Hundreds of thousands lose power as Gustav pounds coast

- Story Highlights
- NEW: In Mississippi, Gustav floods U.S. Highway 90, damages homes and harbor
- 434,000 homes in region lose power; 114,000 of those in New Orleans
- Loose boats could pose “major problem” if they hit canal walls, city’s mayor says
- Watch breaking hurricane news live on CNN.com

NEW ORLEANS, Louisiana (CNN) -- Hurricane Gustav swirled violently ashore Monday, turning lights out across the Gulf Coast and sending water over the tops of New Orleans' levees, officials said.

The storm's eastern bands, which generally pack the most powerful winds, also hammered Mississippi as Gustav moved to the west of New Orleans. Officials in Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, Long Beach and Biloxi reported that Gustav was flooding U.S. Highway 90, making it impassable in parts.

In Pass Christian, Gustav blew vinyl siding off homes and damaged the recently repaired small-boat harbor. At least four boats docked there were swept onto the harbor access road, police Chief John Dubuisson said.

In Biloxi, iReporter Kevin Wise, who lives two blocks from the beach, said Gustav had pushed the Gulf waters into a highway about 100 yards from the normal shoreline.

"On the beach, it was blowing hard enough that you had to squat down to take a picture, it could pretty much throw you around," he told CNN. Wise said he and his wife ignored mandatory evacuation orders for his area.

At 2 p.m. CT, Gustav weakened to a Category 1 storm with sustained winds of 90 mph, the National Hurricane Center said.

Winds were sending whitecaps over levees in New Orleans, but the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported no major problems.

There were reports of water going over the Industrial Canal levee near a railroad bridge, said Chris Macaluso, a spokesman for the Louisiana Office of Coastal Protection and Restoration. The Port of New Orleans will raise the bridge to ease pressure on the system, he said.

The Industrial Canal levee failed during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, devastating the Lower Ninth Ward and neighboring St. Bernard Parish.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency said two Navy boats, each about 350 feet long, that were being scrapped at a facility on the canal broke away from their moorings Monday. Mayor Ray Nagin said the ships, and a barge that broke loose from its moorings, were pinned against a wharf in the Industrial Canal.

"If they get loose and they start to bang around on some of those canal walls, we could have a major problem," he said.

At least seven other barges had broken loose on the Mississippi River and were believed to have run aground on the West Bank, the Coast Guard reported.

Gustav made landfall Monday morning near the coastal town of Cocodrie, Louisiana, about 80 miles southwest of New Orleans.
Though almost 2 million residents evacuated the Louisiana coast, some in New Orleans opted to brave the storm.

"It really didn't look as vicious as, obviously, Katrina did," Jack Bosma said.

He said the wind scattered his back gate across his yard, but his power was on and neighbors had been congregating on his porch.

"It's really, quite honestly, basically, just like a bad storm. It doesn't seem that drastic at all," he said.

Nagin warned residents that though the storm may appear weak by Katrina standards, the New Orleans is "not out of the woods yet."

Nagin said that he had received no reports of major damage as of noon, but there still are storm surges, flooding and the risk of tornadoes. Officials should know more about Gustav's impact about 3 p.m. CT, when the worst of the storm surge is to occur, he said.

As of 10 a.m. Monday, the storm was moving northwest at 15 mph, and "the center of Gustav will track along the south-central Louisiana coast this afternoon, then move into western Louisiana tonight and eastern Texas on Tuesday," the National Weather Service said.

The Weather Service issued tornado warnings for parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida and Alabama, and a tornado was spotted near the Stennis Space Center in Hancock County, Mississippi, near the Louisiana border.

Hancock County is where Katrina made its final landfall three years ago.

From just outside New Orleans, in Harahan, Louisiana, Megan Arseneaux, 19, said in an e-mail that phone service was spotty at her East Bank home, two blocks from the Mississippi River.

"My backyard is full of leaves and debris. The wind was very intense when I woke up around 6 a.m.," she said. "As I type this, the wind has actually picked up. The rain is very harsh too." Watch wind, rain batter Jefferson Parish »

There are concerns that if Gustav moves up the Mississippi River's estuaries, some levees may not hold, resulting in severe flooding. Although many levees have been repaired and heightened since Katrina struck in 2005, all of the work won't be completed until 2011, officials said.

The U.S. Geological Survey said Gustav has already caused an almost 9-foot storm surge in Pointe a La Hache, Louisiana, about 40 miles southeast of New Orleans. Another 1 to 3 feet of surge could occur, the USGS said.

Forecasters warned that a surge of 10 to 14 feet would cause life-threatening flooding. Pointe a La Hache is a mere 3 feet above sea level.

Entergy, the largest provider of electric power in Louisiana, said more than 434,000 customers were without power in the region, including 114,000 in New Orleans. Repair crews may not get out until Wednesday because of high winds, spokesman Phil Allison said. iReport.com: Did you stay? Share your story

Around 8 a.m., Children's Hospital lost power and switched to generators. A short while later, East Jefferson General Hospital lost power and was running on generators.

Forecasters said Gustav could drench parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas in 6 to 12 inches of rain, with the possibility of up to 20 inches in isolated areas by Thursday.

Property damage from Gustav could total $8 billion, just 25 percent of Sunday's estimate, according to a federally supported computer projection issued Monday morning. See damage map »

Forecasters warned Monday morning Gustav could stall over Louisiana and northeast Texas for several days, which would "exacerbate the threat of heavy rains and inland flooding."

Meanwhile, forecasters said Monday afternoon that Tropical Storm Hanna was upgraded to a Category 1 hurricane as it passed through the Bahamas. The National Hurricane Center says Hanna could make landfall Friday near the Georgia/South Carolina border.

CNN's Kathleen Koch, Jeanne Meserve, Mike Ahlers, Morgan Neill, Matt Sloane, Susan Roesgen, Chris Lawrence and Ali Velshi contributed to this report.

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