

At Carolina Coast

NAGS HEAD, N.C. (AP) ? Tropical Storm Gabrielle began to shower North Carolina's Outer Banks with rain and batter them with high winds Sunday as the storm slogged slowly toward the coast.

Forecasters expected the storm to increase its wind speed slightly ? though not to hurricane levels ? before swiping the state's barrier islands on Sunday. After a brief landfall, Gabrielle was expected to take a sharp turn back into the Atlantic, the National Weather Service said.

"All things considered, it's a pretty weak storm," said Casey Quell, a NWS forecaster in Morehead City. "More than anything, it will bring some much-needed rain."

The storm carried top sustained winds of about 45 mph as of 5 a.m. Sunday, the National Weather Service reported. But those winds could strengthen to near 50 mph as Gabrielle nears the coast, according to the weather service.

Gabrielle's center was located about 50 miles southeast of Cape Lookout and was moving slowly ? about 10 mph ? to the north-northwest.

Forecasters issued a tropical storm warning for the North Carolina coastline north of Surf City through the Outer Banks and to the Virginia border. A tropical storm warning was also issued northward to Cape Charles Light, Va., along the Atlantic Coast, and a watch remains in effect for the area extending to New Point Comfort peninsula, along the Chesapeake Bay.

Local officials urged residents and visitors at the vacation hotspot to secure loose items and to stay indoors as the storm blows through.

Austin Lucas, a manager at Howard's Pub on Ocracoke Island, said workers there tied down furniture that was on the roof. But beyond that, he said everyone was just waiting to see when the storm would come.

"We haven't really taken any severe precautions," Lucas said Sunday morning. "Nobody's too concerned about it."

The National Park Service closed all campgrounds on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. But they did not ask or recommend that people leave the islands.

"When people hear about tropical storms, they assume houses are going to fall in the ocean," said Margot Jolly, a lifeguard with Nags Heads Ocean Rescue. "They shouldn't overreact like that. Just relax, stay inside, and have a little hurricane party."

Gabrielle's first showers reached the coastline late Saturday night. Quell said the storm could produce a storm surge of up to 3 feet, with 1 to 3 inches of rain falling in coastal areas and up to 5 inches in isolated spots.

"The greatest danger will be flooding in low lying areas and on roads, such as Highway 12 on the Outer Banks," said North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley. "The most deaths during tropical storms occur when people drive into flood waters and drown. Rip currents will be strong in the ocean."

Rip currents had already caused problems Saturday. David Baker, the Ocean Rescue director for the Wrightsville Beach Fire Department about 150 miles south of Nags Head, told The Star-News of Wilmington that lifeguards rescued about a dozen people from the water because of rip currents.

Gabrielle spun into the storm late Friday after wandering in the Atlantic for several days, caught along an old frontal boundary that stalled about midway between the Southeast coast and Bermuda. Forecasters first labeled it a subtropical storm ? a hybrid system that takes power from warm ocean waters but also forms from warm and cold fronts colliding ? before classifying it a tropical system Saturday.

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"We've been asking residents to be prepared for anything," said Chris Baucom, a spokesman for Dare County Emergency Management. "This storm's track has been kind of unpredictable."

All of North Carolina's counties are facing drought conditions, with 91 percent under a severe drought. Easley asked Friday that all the state's local governments immediately enact voluntary or mandatory water restrictions.