

Storm slaps coastal South with most snow in decades

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — A brutal winter storm smacked the coastal Southeast with a rare blast of snow and ice Wednesday, hitting parts of Florida, Georgia and South Carolina with their heaviest snowfall in nearly three decades.

Forecasters warned that the same system could soon strengthen into a “bomb cyclone” as it rolls up the East Coast, bringing hurricane-force winds, coastal flooding and up to a foot of snow.

At least 17 deaths were blamed on dangerously cold temperatures that for days have gripped wide swaths of the U.S. from Texas to New England.

A winter storm warning extended from the Gulf Coast of Florida’s “Big Bend” region all the way up the Atlantic coast. Forecasters said hurricane-force winds blowing offshore on Thursday could generate 24-foot seas.

Schools in the Southeast called off classes just months after being shut down because of hurricane threats, and police urged drivers to stay off the roads in a region little accustomed to the kind of winter woes common to the Northeast.

In Savannah, snow blanketed the city’s lush downtown squares and collected on branches of burly oaks for the first time in nearly eight years. William Shaw, a Savannah native, used baby steps to shuffle along a frozen road from his home to the post office.

“It almost seems the town is deserted just like in the last hurricane,” said Shaw, 65. “There’s no one on the street. It’s got a little eerie feeling.”

Dump trucks spread sand on major streets in Savannah ahead of the storm and police closed several bridges, overpasses and a major causeway because of ice.

By the time the morning’s dreary sleet and rain turned to fluffy snow, Savannah came out to play. Families with children flocked to Forsyth Park near the downtown historic district for snowball fights. The National



Alora Freeman watches as ice builds along a downtown water fountain in Atlanta, Wednesday. AP Photo/David Goldman



Seeing her first winter weather, 9-month-old Roxie eats snow off the ground of the public basketball courts at Forsyth Park, Wednesday in Savannah, Ga. AP Photo/Stephen B. Morton

Weather Service recorded 1.2 inches of snow — Savannah’s first measurable snowfall since February 2010 and the first that exceeded an inch in 28 years.

Across the Georgia-South Carolina line in Charleston, the weather service reported 5 inches as the snow was winding down at 5 p.m. That’s the most snowfall in Charleston since December

1989, and plenty for Chris Monoc’s sons, ages 4 and 2, to go sledding outside their home near the city’s iconic Ravenel Bridge.

Airports shut down in Savannah, Charleston and elsewhere as airlines cancelled 500 flights Wednesday, and at least 1,700 more were cancelled Thursday. Interstate 95 was nearly an icy parking lot for almost all of

its 200 miles in South Carolina. Troopers couldn’t keep up with the number of reported wrecks which numbered in the hundreds.

In Tallahassee, Florida, Michigan transplant Laura Donaven built a snowman 6 inches tall. The city tweeted that snow fell there for the first time in 28 years.

“I made a snowball and threw it at my dad,” said Donaven, a 41-year-old hair salon owner.

The weather service said the winter storm will probably intensify into a “bomb cyclone” that could dump more than 8 inches of snow on the Boston area on Thursday and at least half a foot of snow in the New York City region.

Meteorologists have been using the term “bomb” for storms for decades, but the phrase went viral on social media on Wednesday. A storm is a bomb — or bombogenesis happens — when it drops 24 millibars of pressure in 24 hours. This storm looks like it will intensify twice that rate, said Bob Oravec, lead forecaster at the National Weather Service’s Weather Prediction Center.

SNOW: Permit required for parking in an Oregon sno-park

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Still, despite the low snow year, there are options for recreation. Here are a few of them, and advice on where to go depending on your favorite winter hobby.

Mt. Emily

Located six miles east of Meacham off Interstate 84, the Meacham Divide/Mt. Emily sno-park offers some of the best public, groomed cross country ski trails in the state.

The Blue Mountain Nordic Club, which is made up of dozens of club members from both sides of the mountain, man the ski trails and also plow about 1.7 miles of the Summit Road from the interstate to the sno-park. The north side of the park is a lot that connects to nordic skiing trails, while the south side consists of a lot for snowmobilers. Many of them ride farther down the rest of the unplowed summit road to the trail of their choice.

Bruce Johnson, trails coordinator for the nordic club, said they groom the ski trails after major snowstorms, which unfortunately have not arrived since Christmas.

“It’s pretty slippery up there right now,” he said. “Pretty hard-pack. The tracks are still pretty fast, downhill in particular.”

Still, the trails are the closest and easiest for nordic skiers in Pendleton and much of Umatilla County. Snowshoers are welcome on the non-motorized rails as well, but they are asked to not walk on the groomed portion.

A donation box is located at the entrance to the trails, which helps defray the costs of grooming and plowing.

“We groom as long as we have money to do it,” said Johnson. “Every bit helps.”

Tollgate area snowmobile parks

Along Highway 204, which connects Weston and Elgin, there are multiple snowmobile-centric sno-parks. Each offers a place to park off-highway and access to numerous trails and consistent snow.

Morning Creek, Langdon Lake, Milepost 20, Milepost 22 (across from Spout Springs) and Milepost 27 are sno-parks that cater almost exclusively to snowmobiling. Places like Woodland, a campground located between Milepost 22 and Andies Prairie, offers access to snowmobiles as well as cross country ski trails.

The Langdon Lake park, little more than a parking lot located on the private-lake side



Sledders gather around a fire pit at the sno-park in Andies Prairie on Monday east of Tollgate. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

of Highway 204, is one of the most-used. Its location allows riders direct access to closed Skyline Road that runs all the way to Jubilee Lake, as well as the ability to explore numerous routes down Forest Service Roads and into the forest itself.

The Tollgate Trail Finders Snowmobile Club grooms many trails in the area, participates in search and rescue operations, hosts events and disseminates trail reports. Check out their latest information at: <http://tollgatetrailfinders.org/>

Spout Springs

Since it opened in 1956, winter recreation in the Tollgate area has been centered around Spout Springs downhill ski area. But since the ski area has closed once again for the season, the area is now home to recreationists other than downhill skiers.

According to the Forest Service, snowmobilers are not allowed within the ski area boundary, which is open to the public only for non-motorized use. Backcountry skiers and snowshoers have taken to the hill’s wide, cleared runs despite the lack of a ski lift.

Andies Prairie

One of the most well-used sno-parks in the region, Andies Prairie offers a little bit of everything.

A bowl-shaped hill within walking distance of the parking lot is a favorite of parents and their children, who sled and slide down its snowy banks. Still, the area is deceptively

steep in spots — parents should always keep a watchful eye on their young ones.

Snowmobiles have access to their own routes, and snowshoers and cross country skiers can trundle through the snow to find some peace and quiet. The area is a favorite for folks looking for an easy place to harvest their own Christmas tree, with a permit of course.

Across the road is the excellent Horseshoe Prairie Road sno-park, which is open only to non-motorized travel, especially nordic skiing. A wide variety of tracks are offered of differing skill levels.

One of the benefits of Andies Prairie is its easy access. A paved parking lot connects directly to Highway 204, meaning there is no risk of getting stuck on snow-covered gravel roads.

While four-wheel drive, good tires and a high-clearance vehicle are critical to accessing some of the parks, Andies is open to just about everyone who can get themselves up Weston Mountain.

Four Corners

Located 20 miles east of Ukiah off Oregon Highway 244, Four Corners offers excellent off-trail snowmobile riding.

The open area features no marked or groomed trails, but is a favorite for riders who want to cut their own path through the snow.

Farther afield, well-used sno-parks in the region include downhill ski and snowboard

areas like Anthony Lakes and Ferguson Ridge (which are also bases for snowmobilers). Catherine Creek on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest is a favorite for snowmobilers, and it also includes a de facto sledding center within walking distance. The Salt Creek Summit southeast of Joseph in Wallowa County is often filled with a variety of winter enthusiasts, from snowmobilers to backcountry skiers and snowboarders.

Permits

A sno-park permit is required for parking in an Oregon sno-park between Nov. 1 and April 30. The money raised by permit sales pay for snow removal services at the parks, and the entire program is self-sufficient.

An annual permit costs \$25, a 3-day version costs \$9 and a daily pass is \$4. Last year, the Oregon Department of Transportation sold 65,287 annual permits, and the five-year average for 1-day permits is about 83,000 per year.

According to Karen Morrison, maintenance services coordinator, the number of snow park permits sold in a given year often depends on the amount of snow the state receives, how widespread, and how early in the season snows arrive.

Display them on the lower left corner of your vehicle’s windshield. The permits are sold at all DMV offices, sporting goods stores and other retail outlets.

FLU: Contributes to 36,000 deaths in the U.S. each year

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medical officer, said the Pendleton Family Medicine waiting room is rarely empty.

“We’re seeing a big uptick in respiratory infections earlier than we usually do,” Hitzman said. “Usually we see the big uptick in February or March. This started before Christmas and we’re not through it yet.”

The influenza vaccine isn’t particularly effective this season because of mutation in the flu strain that is circulating. Thomas recommends getting a flu shot anyway. She referenced a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics that suggests that getting vaccinated reduces a child’s risk of dying from the flu. For adults, getting a flu shot could also mean a milder case.

“It’s almost never too late,” Thomas said. “People should drop what they’re doing and go get a flu shot.”

Umatilla County Public Health Director James Setzer, who is trained as an epidemiologist, isn’t yet alarmed about flu numbers.

“We’re ahead of last year in terms of numbers of cases, but they aren’t very different from projections,” Setzer said. “While we’re having high activity, it’s not unexpectedly high in Umatilla County. We’re not in a panic or high-alert mode.”

Oregon doesn’t report adult flu-related deaths, but Washington has confirmed 20 so far this season. OHA spokesman Jonathan Modie said Oregon doesn’t monitor adult flu-related fatalities because adults often die of multiple causes such as pneumonia and heart failure.

“Flu might have been a contributing factor, but it’s difficult to track,” Modie said.

Oregon does track pediatric deaths. So far this season, no children have died from influenza.

The CDC reports that flu contributes to an estimated 36,000 deaths in the U.S. each year. About 200,000 people land in hospitals. At highest risk are children under the age of 5, adults 65 years or older, pregnant women and those with medical conditions such as asthma, heart or lung disease, or a weakened immune system.

Oregon and 20 other states are experiencing high influenza activity. Others are Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia. Widespread influenza (an indicator of geographic range rather than intensity) was reported in 36 states, including Oregon.

Flu season will likely take a couple more months to wind down. In the meantime, Hitzman said, “I encourage people who are sick to stay home and drink plenty of fluids.”

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or 941-966-0810.

DEQ: More than 100 vacant positions at the agency

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severe negative health effects, and have been found to cause cancer, lung disease, respiratory illness, birth defects and developmental disorders, according to the Secretary of State’s audit released Wednesday.

The delays also “frustrate” the business community and put the agency’s credibility in danger, auditors said.

Auditors said many factors slow down the permitting process, including more than 100 vacant positions at the agency, lack of succession planning, guidance and support for employees, and a “poorly documented and inconsistent” permit process.

Additionally, Cleaner Air Oregon, a recent project of the governor to use health-based standards to reduce air toxins, has required additional work that reduces the amount of time regulators have to issue permits and do compliance inspections.

DEQ Director Richard Whitman said in a response to the audit that he agrees with auditors’ recommendations and the agency is working to put them into action.

The issue of air pollution has been a topic of interest in the Portland area recently, in the wake of a scandal around elevated levels of toxins detected near Bullseye Glass Co.’s stained-glass factory in Southeast Portland.

The latest development in the saga is Bullseye’s \$30 million lawsuit against Gov. Kate Brown and the DEQ, alleging that state government unfairly targeted the company after the U.S. Forest Service found elevated lead levels in moss near the factory in 2015.

While Oregon has a reputation as a sylvan wonderland, the state has the highest ranking of all U.S. states for non-cancer health risks caused by “hazardous air pollutants,” according to the National Air Toxic Assessment.

That assessment is cited in the audit, although auditors noted that the “overall quality of data submitted by states varies” in the assessment, and that the EPA indicates that the results should be interpreted cautiously.

According to that same assessment, Oregon’s cancer risk is 24th out of U.S. states; Multnomah County ranks third for non-cancer hazards and 56th for cancer risk out of all U.S. counties.

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