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Lee Loses Strength, but Still Poses a Flooding Threat

By Campbell Robertson
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NEW ORLEANS — The remnants of what was once Tropical Storm Lee, a slow-moving but extremely wet system that lumbered its way onto the Louisiana coast on Sunday, were still bringing high winds and rains to the Gulf Coast on Monday morning, leaving a wet Labor Day but less damage than had been feared.

Flash-flood watches were still in effect for parts of the coast, and local officials were still trying to calculate the toll of the storm, a task made more difficult by the closing of so many roads because of flooding. Now a tropical depression, the system was expected to travel through Mississippi and Alabama to Tennessee, where its rains could lead to flash flooding because of the rocky soil and the valleys where runoff could become dangerous.

There were several factors suggesting that Lee might hold onto its strength a bit longer, but it fell apart fairly rapidly from late evening Sunday into Monday.

“It’s lifting out to the northeast rather quickly,” said Robert Ricks of the National Weather Service’s forecasting office in Slidell, La. “It’s just leaving us with quite a bit of high rivers and runoff to contend with.” The tides were still above normal, he said, but strong winds alleviated that on Monday.

The storm’s wide bands brought drenching rain but were separated by intervals of dry air and sunshine, leaving hours of calm weather. While officials cautioned residents not to be lulled into complacency, they also said the respites allowed some time to clear drainage basins.

As of Sunday afternoon, the National Weather Service’s storm prediction center listed 11 reports of tornadoes along the Gulf Coast on Saturday and 2 on Sunday. No injuries were reported, though there was damage to houses, campers and trees. The Press-Register of Mobile, Ala., reported that a trailer was split in half, but that the family inside was unharmed.

Gavin Phillips of the National Weather Service office in Slidell said on Sunday that as the system moved into the western Carolinas, it was likely to interact with another front and could cause flash flooding.

Flooding led to road closings around southern Louisiana and Mississippi, leaving some communities isolated and making any damage estimates preliminary until officials could reach those areas. Over half of Louisiana's parishes have declared states of emergency; in some the crisis seems to have passed, while in others the rain continued to be a threat.

"We're nowhere near out of the woods yet," said Brennan Matherne, a spokesman for Lafourche Parish in southern Louisiana. "We're looking at the radar, and it just looks like a conveyor belt of constant showers."

Many of the areas that have experienced the worst of the flooding along the coast are outside levees, so the homes in these areas were built on stilts.

Philip Allison, a spokesman for the Entergy power utility, said that as of Sunday evening about 6,300 customers were without power in Louisiana, down from about 35,000 on Saturday. Those power failures were scattered throughout the southeastern part of Louisiana, with fewer than 200 in New Orleans.

Lee's threat was always its storm surge combined with a heavy continuous downpour, and areas of the coast were still trying to assess what exactly the wet onslaught had done to low-lying areas and homes outside the flood protection system.

The tidal surge, said Kriss Fortunato, a spokeswoman for Jefferson Parish, caused "a big, big flooding problem" in Lafitte and surrounding communities, where she said the tides overnight had added to the problems "There are some homes that did take on water," she said, though the exact total is not yet known. A change in the wind on Monday was likely to help the situation there, she said.