

Hurricane's strongest winds rip Onslow, Topsail Island

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NORTH TOPSAIL BEACH — Debris piled up and utility officials stood waist-deep around dawn Saturday in a huge crater that used to be Secondary Road 1568 at North Topsail Beach.

It was the beginning of what will be a long job of assessing damage and making repairs to make life livable again on an island hit hard by Hurricane Bertha.

"We have, I'd say, probably several thousand feet of roadway partially washed out on 1568," said Billy Dixon, county maintenance supervisor for the DOT.

Though officials all over Southeastern North Carolina reported storm damage, Bertha unleashed her fiercest rage in Onslow County and on Topsail Island.

That's because Bertha's eye hit land between Wrightsville Beach and Topsail Island, said Bob Frederick, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Newport. So the storm's northeast quadrant, packing the strongest winds, swept across coastal towns in Pender, Onslow and Carteret counties.

Emerald Isle, a barrier island town in Carteret County, saw wind gusts of about 110 mph, said Town Manager Pete Allen. The storm destroyed the town's wind gauge.

Early damage estimates in Onslow County are \$40 million and are expected to climb as assessments continue. Jacksonville damage estimates have not been completed.

At least 127 homes in Onslow County were destroyed. That does not include Jacksonville or Swansboro because assessments are still being conducted there.

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Surf City Police Chief David Jones

At the northern tip of Topsail Island, three vehicles tossed about by the wind had come to rest across the roadway, far from the garages where they had been parked and left behind by their owners. A red car lay partly submerged in water that filled the crater. Another car teetered on the edge of the hole, several feet from another vehicle tossed up against a fallen light pole.

About 20 feet of county water lines lay exposed near the crater.

Elsewhere, about 1,000 feet of water lines were exposed by the storm, said North Topsail Mayor Marty Bostic.

Farther down the ocean side, at Ocean Bay Village, nearly every home was damaged. Stairs and railings were torn from the homes, and broken windows exposed damp mattresses and household items. Washers and dryers littered the ground, lying alongside motorcycles soaking in pools of water.

One washing machine was wrapped around a post that once helped support a condominium's upper deck. Cars parked inside garages were piled on top of each other, hood over trunk, beneath a load of debris including weight machines.

Utility poles along the north end of the island had been blown into a domino arrangement, each bent lower than the preceding one.

Tom Sais, riding a bicycle, was one of the first to survey the damage in the light of day.

"I watched the surge," said Mr. Sais, who rode out the storm on the second floor of a condominium at Topsail Dunes. "The water kept building on the beach and building on the beach and all of a sudden, like a

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IN BERTHA'S WAKE/Assessing the Damage

Bertha

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giant boat wake, where it was tapping on the dunes, it just built and overran it."

• Mr. Sais said he felt confident about staying on the island until he lost power and communication.

• "I just didn't know what was going on," Mr. Sais said. "I knew there were supposed to be 70 to 80 mph winds and I knew this wasn't that. It was more. When was it going to stop? The roof blew off. The building was twisting and creaking."

• At the height of the storm, he realized he shouldn't have stayed, he said.

• People were having the same thoughts in Surf City at the south end of the island. During the height of the storm, Police Chief David Jones and his officers rescued more than 50 people who changed their minds and decided not to leave Bertha.

• "We went to get a lady that was up at the north end, and we got out of the car trying to get to her house, and the roof picked up off her house and just missed the patrol car and us by about 6 feet," he said. "A whole roof crashed in the road in front of us."

• No one was injured, "thank God," he said.

• The Surf City Fire Department also found people begging to be rescued during the storm. As the wind tossed objects through the air and water rose across the road, a patrol from the Fire Department found two people in the road waving a yellow sheet.

• Two others came running toward the fire truck just as firefighters were helping move a police car that was stuck in the sand, Lt. Daphne Fowler said.

• "It was crazy," said Capt. Robert Steffe of the Surf City Fire Department. "I just can't believe we were actually here when this was happening."

• Forty homes were destroyed at Surf City, Chief Jones said.

• The Surf condominiums lost the roofs from two buildings, Capt. Steffe said. "Roads are totally closed," Chief Jones said.

Near the Pender-Onslow County line, much of the protective dune line is gone. Sand from dunes that used to line the beach now covers the road.

"It's three feet of sand, plus everything that was under people's houses are now in the roadway," he said.

Spewing in the afternoon surf was the heavily damaged Barnack-Bill's pier. The end of it was washed away and the rest is badly mangled or lying on the beach, washed up by the tide.

"All of the island's piers had some damage."

Early damage assessment in Topsail Beach showed five homes were completely damaged and about 50 had minor damage, said Carson Smith, Pender County emergency management coordinator.

Officials said the beach strand had some erosion, but they weren't sure how much.

Elsewhere in the region, damage wasn't nearly as severe, but it was significant in Pender County.

Hampstead escaped without serious structural damage. Trees blocking roads were the worst problem, but by late Friday crews had cleared most main roads, said Woody Sullivan, Pender East emergency management director.

New Hanover County

New Hanover County Emergency Management Director Dan Summers estimated that areas outside the city limits received about \$12.5 million in damage. That does not include \$2 million in response costs or property damage at New Hanover Regional Medical Center, he said.

County building inspectors, who acted as the assessment teams, estimated 1,480 houses outside the city were damaged. Estimated repair costs are \$6.48 million, Mr. Summers said.

Inspectors estimated it would take \$1.08 million to repair about 250 damaged homes.

"Teams that evaluated the damage in Wilmington found fewer problems."

Wilmington Mayor Don Betz said it would take about \$1 million to repair the 26 business and 108 houses damaged in the city.

Pleasure Island

Pleasure Island was buzzing with activity Saturday as swarms of power crews, prison inmates, National Guard troops and police from two states tried



What's left of Kure Beach's fishing pier stands in the ocean Saturday.

to ready the island for the return of residents.

Destruction was scattered throughout the island, but Kure Beach likely sustained the worst damage. High winds lifted the roof off The Dockside Inn and slammed it into the motel's living quarters. The deck and part of the roof of the nearby Moran Motel was blown off, and the Kure Beach pier was destroyed by 25-foot waves.

Many homes sustained roof damage, and some minor structural damage, but none were destroyed.

At Carolina Beach, the pounding ocean washed over the dunes in at least five places on the north end, leaving four blocks of Carolina Avenue North covered in several feet of sand. The sand berm, which was just built up late year and planted with sea oaks, was flattened, leaving homes vulnerable to future storms.

Trees fell on several homes on the island's interior and blocked many streets. An islandwide power failure also damaged Carolina Beach's main sewer pumping station sending unknown amounts of sewage into the streets. Raw sewage was still flowing into the streets near the Boardwalk Saturday afternoon.

Damage was estimated in the millions.

Dozens of smashed docks, broken pilings and sunken boats littered the Intracoastal Waterway between Carolina Beach and Wrightsville Beach, forcing the Coast Guard to close the area to boaters, said Petty Officer J.P. Brown.

"It is closed, but vessels can pass at their own risk," he said.

By Saturday afternoon, a major cleanup was well under way on Pleasure Island. Crews had removed about a dozen power lines from the streets and replaced some utility poles. But broken poles were still scattered around the island.

Power was restored to a few hundred homes.

At least 100 prison inmates and National Guard troops were busy removing

debris, including boards, gutters and thousands of shingles and roofing nails that were blown into the streets. And about 45 law officers from Charleston, S.C. and Mecklenburg County patrolled the streets along with local police to prevent looting and keep order.

There were several reports of looting at businesses and homes after the storm in Carolina Beach, Police Chief Mike Mayer said. But no arrests were made.

Residents were allowed back on the island at 6 p.m. but an 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew and a ban on alcohol sales remained in effect. Officials have not decided when tourists will be allowed on the island.

At the Islander Kwik Mart, about the only store open in Carolina Beach, demand for alcohol was already high by Saturday afternoon.

"The hottest item is beer, but we can't sell it," said clerk Odette Gentry. Curing nearly out the door was a line of people who had stayed on the island during the storm. The store had already run out of ice and was selling canned goods and sodas at a fast pace. "We have been swamped," Ms. Gentry said.

Wrightsville Beach

Wrightsville Beach bounced back quickly.

Bertha stripped off shingles but caused no major damage to houses.

Wrightsville Beach Mayor Herb McKim said between 125 and 130 houses lost shingles or piers or suffered \$5,000 or more in damage. He estimated total damage at \$712,000, including \$130,000 to the two fishing piers.

Johnnie Mercer's Fishing Pier lost about 75 feet, and the Oceanic pier had some damaged pilings, he said.

Power had been restored to most of the town before property owners were allowed back onto the island at noon Saturday. Carolina Power & Light Co. cut the current about 11:30 a.m. Friday before the strongest winds hit.

Town officials said that helped prevent transformers from blowing, so repairs mostly involved putting the lines back up.

A 30-foot sailboat in Banks Channel was tossed into the marsh.

Erosion at Shell Island Resort appeared minimal.

Figure Eight Island

The security guard refused to allow reporters onto Figure Eight Island, but

the exclusive resort apparently came out of the hurricane in good shape.

Pat Burn, owner of Boat Lifts and Marine Construction of Wilmington, was asked by some of his clients to check on their property there. Most of the people who own property were out of town, he said. Damage included shingles blown off some oceanfront houses and a floating dock that broke loose.

"There are some shingles missing and a little shrub damage," Mr. Burn said outside the security guardhouse.

Wrightsville Beach and Figure Eight, which is just north of Wrightsville, likely avoided a hard hit because of Bertha's path, said Gene Funderburk, a spokesman for the National Weather Service's Wilmington office.

The strongest winds were to the east and northeast of the eye and stayed over the ocean as it passed the two islands.

Hospital damage

New Hanover Regional Medical Center was closed to returning to normal Saturday after suffering \$1 million in damage, mostly from water blown through the east face of the hospital tower. The water damaged ceilings and window casings in about 150 patient rooms, portions of the clinical laboratory and the areas around the operating rooms.

The hospital had full power restored by Friday evening. Roof and window damage was minimal, a release from the hospital said. Several trees on hospital grounds blew down.

Bald Head, Southport

Even though Bald Head Island suffered a direct hit from Bertha, little was damaged, probably because the storm hit at low tide, said Joyce Fulton of Bald Head Island Management Inc.

The island's assessment team reported little damage to the sand-filled tubes installed to fight beach erosion.

Power and water were restored to most of the island Saturday afternoon, and property owners and island employees were allowed to return.

Normal ferry service will resume Monday, but tourists will not be allowed on the island until Tuesday.

In Southport, residents and visitors — some a bit teary-eyed — picked up pieces of the cedar tree at Whittler's Beach to keep as souvenirs. Some posed for pictures in front of the landmark tree, split in two during the storm.

"I was devastated when I heard it," said Leila Pigott, who has lived in the same house in Southport for 53 years.

A charter member of the Southport Garden Club, Mrs. Pigott helped plant the cedar at Whittler's Beach after Hurricane Hazel destroyed the two poplars that grew there in 1954.

The tow's men used to sit on the bench that surrounds the tree and gossip and whittle, she said.

The Garden Club will decide how to replace the cedar, she said.

Southport officials were assessing the damage Saturday and should have a report today.

Brunswick beaches

Preliminary reports showed minimal damage to Brunswick County beaches.

All of the island bridges were reopened by Saturday morning, and by early afternoon, tourists were sunning on Holden Beach and collecting shells washed up by the storm.

"The beach is 100 percent open," said Holden Beach Town Manager Sean Anderson.

The damage assessment team will finish its report Monday morning, but the storm only partially tore off about four roofs, Mr. Anderson said.

One house fell onto the beach on the island's east end after 6 to 8 feet of sand eroded. The house, which has been empty for several years, is now sitting on the sand. It was about to fall over before the storm hit, Mr. Anderson said.

Town officials cleared everyone off the island before the storm except one person, Mr. Anderson said.

That man, Jerry Mowery, said he filled up his bathtub with water, brought his dogs and birds inside and watched the storm.

"The wind shook the house a little bit," he said. "I really did not get scared, but I got a little worried when they said it was going to be a Category 3."

Mr. Mowery, a member of the town's evacuation team, rode around the island telling people to get off and then went home to ride it out.

Staff writers Bettie Fennell, Philip Hervey, Mary Munch, Holly Robinson and Paul R. Schmidt contributed to this report.