

# FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

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WEEK OF MAY 8-14, 2019

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Vol. XIII, No. 5 • FREE

OCTOBER, 2018 — MAY, 2019



**Sing, write, sing**  
The Key West Songwriters Festival celebrates its 24th year with awesome lineup. **C1** ▶

## Aid DELAYED

Seven months after Cat 5 Hurricane Michael slammed the panhandle, devastation remains. Forgotten residents feel like pawns in a political game.



STORY AND PHOTOS BY EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

**At top: Residents affected by Hurricane Michael, seven months later.**

**Above: A condo building that was destroyed on Mexico Beach. Many of the town's residents are optimistic but also tired of waiting for Congress, which stalled for months in passing a comprehensive disaster relief bill that includes Hurricane Michael.**

**D**RIVING IN TO MEXICO BEACH on Highway 98 along the Emerald Coast, its white-sand beaches are as beautiful as ever. But seven months after taking a direct hit from a Category 5 hurricane, this small town in the Florida panhandle looks as if it had been bombed. The surrounding Bay County and residents throughout the panhandle also felt severe effects.

SEE MICHAEL, A16 ▶



NOAA PHOTO  
Aerial view of catastrophic damage in Mexico Beach, Florida which suffered a direct hit from Hurricane Michael on Oct. 10, 2018.



**Networking**  
Southwest Florida Community Foundation Women's Legacy Fund luncheon. **A38** ▶



**Norway connection**  
Nor-Tech High Performance Boats is speeding along at a fast pace. **A33** ▶



**Real Estate**  
Madison, Grand Rapids, Seattle among top markets for Millennials. **B1** ▶

## Birders get rare glimpse of red-legged Caribbean thrush

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

The Tropical Audubon Society's online Bird Board said it all:

"Red-legged Thrush. Lantana Nature Preserve; many birders on it."

That was enough to send birdwatchers flocking to Lantana Nature Preserve recently when the bird, seen only one previous time in North America, was spotted.

The red-legged thrush was seen April 25 by a man from Arizona who photographed it at 7 a.m. At first, he thought it was an exotic species, but confirmation from two other birders revealed what he had found, a news release said.

Word of the sighting was spread through online messaging and the birding website

SEE THRUSH, A21 ▶



PAUL WALLER / COURTESY PHOTO

The red-legged thrush, seen at Lantana Nature Preserve on Florida's East Coast, has been spotted in North America only one other time.

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EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Sandra Weinmann braids Bela Sebastiao's hair at the spot a few blocks from the water where the Sebastiao's two-story home used to be. Ms. Sebastiao, 47, and her husband and U.S. Army veteran Jack Sebastiao, 61, live in a FEMA trailer with an above ground sewer system since city sewer is still not up and running here. They retired here from Georgia two years ago. Ms. Weinmann, 24, is their son's girlfriend visiting from Germany.

# MICHAEL

From page 1

Residents attest that life is still far from back to normal. They are struggling to recover their losses, if they can, while going about a daily life that has simply become wearisome in ways small and large. Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress has bickered politically for months over a comprehensive aid package that has yet to be released. Congress voted down one \$13 billion package that would have included Michael. The federal and state governments have provided piecemeal help, but the stalled on any comprehensive aid package.

The Florida Legislature ended its session Saturday, May 4, by passing a state budget that includes \$220 million for Michael recovery, bringing its total aid to \$1.8 billion. That has raised hopes that the federal government would follow suit. Only the U.S. government has the funds at hand to begin a full recovery for those affected by

Michael, a storm that by NOAA's estimate caused \$18.4 billion in damage in Florida and \$25 billion in the U.S.

"It's maddening. It's maddening that that is stalled," said Mexico Beach City Administrator Tanya Castro. "This (storm) affected so many lives. It's maddening. For those of us working in the trenches every day it makes no sense. I just can't understand it."

In the nearby town of Port St. Joe, lifetime resident Linda Wood, 70, operations manager for the Cape San Blas Lighthouse, is also frustrated. Many of her friends and neighbors were flooded or their homes destroyed. The First Baptist Church near the lighthouse was another building that is still waiting to be demolished because it was structurally unsound after the hurricane.

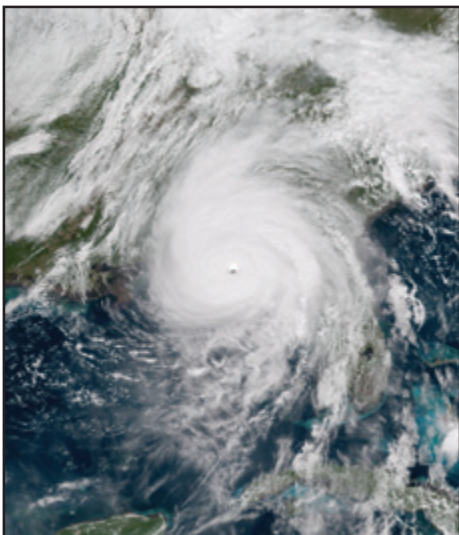
"My feeling is that instead of doing the right thing, they're (state and federal political leaders) more concerned about what they want politically than the people here who are still suffering seven months later," she said. "I have friends who are just going through devastation and aren't getting any help."

People in Mexico Beach and the surrounding communities said that life in which storm recovery looms large day in and day out, seven months on, has started to wear thin. Many visitors who come through town (including this reporter, before being assigned this story) are unaware that it was even hit by Michael, suggesting for some that they are forgotten and isolated in their struggles. And that's only intensified by the parade of political figures making their way through town and fighting over aid packages that fail to arrive. All the while demolition crews cleared entire blocks of homes and condos, now reduced to their foundations.

Mexico Beach city crews alone removed, so far, an estimated 1.07 million cubic yards of debris. NOAA reported that 47.8 percent of the town's buildings were destroyed (809 out of 1,692) and nearly all were damaged. Part of the city on the



Michael Kent, owner of the old Buena Vista Motel, the remains of which sit in the empty space just behind him on the beach. He is working toward rebuilding a business of some kind.



NOAA PHOTO

Hurricane Michael making landfall on the Florida Panhandle at peak intensity on Oct. 10.



Mexico Beach has no gas station at the moment. This is one of three that were destroyed.



“It has been a strange notion to realize that everything material that you strove for has disappeared ... Yet another reason to rejoice in a new day, a new start, a new beginning.” — **Michael Kent**, owner, Buena Vista Motel

gulf side of Highway 98 still doesn't have a working sewer system.

There is still no gas station (out of three), no hotel (out of four, only one was not destroyed), no grocery store, no bank, no 800-foot town pier, and the city police and fire departments are sharing a cramped temporary trailer. Its tourism industry and economic engine, based on bed tax, was decimated (off 98 percent this year so far).

County tourism advocates and supporters ask that you stop in and patronize a handful of shops and restaurants as they begin to reopen and soldier on. Many more local businesses, some social institutions, are simply gone.

Fifteen years ago, a Los Angeles actor named Michael Scoggins came to Mexico Beach and opened Killer Seafood. The restaurant was destroyed and Mr. Scoggins is still looking at ways to restart the business.

“In our place with a 40-seat restaurant we got to know all (customers) so well that they really did become part of our family,” he said.

Across the street, the Buena Vista Motel, which survived Hurricane Opal in 1995, is just an empty space. Owner Michael Kent came back the day after the storm to find “nothing left,” he said.

“It has been a strange notion to realize that everything material that you strove for has disappeared,” he posted on Facebook in December. “Yet another reason to rejoice in a new day, a new start, a new beginning.”

Mexico Beach Mayor Al Cathey, who runs a hardware store in town with his family, said that the total bill for the city will come to around \$300 million. After FEMA pays back the requisite 75 percent and the state 12.5 percent, that will leave \$37.5 million — 10 times the city's yearly \$3.5 million budget. Many panhandle communities face that harsh math, he adds.

“We have to have a disaster bill,” Mayor Cathey said. “We cannot survive, literally cannot survive in the rebuild of our city if we're forced into borrowing ourselves out of debt. We can't do that. And that's why those disaster bills held up in Congress and the state level in the House and in the Senate, you know, come on. We've got a real problem. Every municipality in every county, that's the same formula. So we've got a mess, needless to say.”

This city of about 1,500 permanent residents, as well as thousands more loyal tourists and part timers, sits right on the gulf, unshielded by islands.

“We have a very, very loyal repeat visitation,” said Kimberly Shoaf, president of Mexico Beach Tourist Development Council. “They have been coming here for 20, 30, 40 years. They are just as vested as residents.”

The town took a direct hit from Michael, only the fourth Category 5 to hit Florida after Andrew (1992) with sustained winds of 160 miles per hour and 15-foot-plus storm surge. While an outpouring of help by local residents, nonprofit organizations,



Only a toilet and some flooring remain of this house in Mexico Beach. Many of the city's beach side homes were destroyed, though the beach itself is as lovely as ever.

EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

and grass-roots supporters continues, that support has amounted to a drop in the bucket compared to what the government could release.

An economic development consultant and former deputy chief of staff for the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, Erin Gillespie, said that while the state can help, the federal government has the greatest latitude when it comes to comprehensive aid.

“Congress has the ability to allocate billions in disaster recovery funding after federally declared disasters,” she said. “And we know they will do that at some stage put it should have happened already. For Congress to not have allocated the money that these communities deserve is completely ridiculous, to be honest ... This is what federal tax dollars are supposed to do.”

She adds that even after it is released, it will take time for that money to filter down through layers of bureaucracy.

“The problem is going to be the long-term funding that comes in for disaster recovery takes a long time to get there even after Congress allocates it. I think the state's doing a pretty good job of trying to move assets around. But they're not going to be able to match the assets of the federal government. The frustrating part



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY SHEALAH CRAIGHEAD  
President Donald J. Trump, joined by Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen, listens as FEMA Administrator Brock Long addresses reporters in the Oval Office of the White House Wednesday, Oct. 10, 2018, on the possible impact of Hurricane Michael to Florida and the southeast region of the United States.

is we know that money will come down. The timing of it has just been so slow it leaves these communities in the lurch.

“The state has to do an incredible amount of planning to follow the bureaucracy of the federal government once it is released. It can't do anything until the federal government moves forward first.”

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-FL, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-CA, declined requests for an interview.

In recent weeks, Sen. Rubio sent aides to Mexico Beach to record stories of resi-

dents and business owners to convince Congress to act.

Mr. Rubio said in a press release:

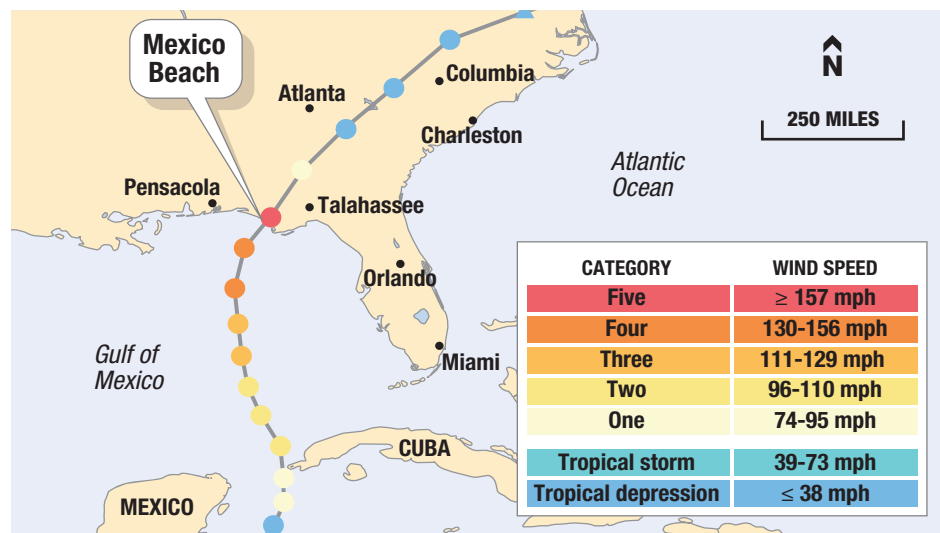
“Playing politics with disaster funding may score Senate Democrats points with their far-left base for ‘resisting’ the president, but it comes at the expense of real people and communities in Florida. It has been six months since Hurricane Michael struck Florida's panhandle, and we are up against a very real deadline to deliver much-needed resources. The time for political games and rhetoric is over. It's time to act.”

The cost of damage reached \$25 billion in the U.S., including \$18.4 billion in Florida, NOAA says. Most of that was property and infrastructure damage. While Mexico Beach, Tyndall Air Force Base, and the rest of Bay County caught the brunt of the storm, parts of nearby Port St. Joe and Panama City look just as bad. In the Panama City metro area, more than 45,000 structures were damaged. Forty-three deaths, both direct and indirect, were attributed to the storm.

Pine forests have also been flattened across the panhandle and experts have warned that poses a wildfire risk. NOAA estimates \$3.3 billion in damage to forestry and agricultural industries. The sun beats down on once shaded areas of Mexico Beach where thousands of trees were destroyed. Framed by a gutted strip mall there are 14 acres of dead trees and dirt where there was once a pine forest alongside a canal that is still being dredged of sand. Many trees still standing are dying or dead due to saltwater damage.

Much of the panhandle faced major damage. Bay and 11 other counties with about 721,000 residents were “severely impacted,” says Rebuild 850, a 501(c)(3) disaster fund set up to help rebuild Florida's panhandle communities. Those counties include (not in order): Bay, Holmes (pop: 19,000), Washington (25,000), Jackson (48,000), Calhoun (15,000), Gulf (16,000), Liberty (8,000), Franklin (12,000), Gadsden (46,000), Leon (293,000), Wakulla (32,000) and Taylor (22,000).

SEE MICHAEL, A18 ►



Tony Whitfield, owner of Lookout Lounge and Shipwreck Raw Bar in Port St. Joe. He says affordable workforce housing will be one of the biggest challenges as businesses start to open up after the storm and look to start hiring again. “It was a challenge before and now it's doubly so,” he said.



Kimberly Shoaf, president of Mexico Beach Tourist Development Council. The city's bed tax collections are off 98 percent this year due to the storm but the city has a loyal following of tourists and part-time residents.



Junierrt Vazquez, 21, works at a Wave Runner shop on Mexico Beach owned by his family along with Crazy Beach Pizza just next door. It's one of the local businesses that is open after the storm. “It's tough but sometimes you've just got to put a smile on your face and keep on (going),” he said.





EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

The El Governor Motel is the only Mexico Beach hotel that survived Michael. Workers hope to have it ready to reopen in 2020.

in the know

Ways you can help

>> For the Florida Panhandle, donate to Rebuild 850. Visit [www.rebuild850.org](http://www.rebuild850.org)

>> Volunteer Florida also has a Hurricane Michael fund. Visit [www.volunteerflorida.org/hurricane-michael-response/](http://www.volunteerflorida.org/hurricane-michael-response/)

>> Never Forgotten Coast and Mexico Beach Hurricane Relief

Alex Workman and his wife Chelsea Workman, who run a commercial photography and film business based in Tallahassee and have family in Mexico Beach, worked with friends and supporters to create the Never Forgotten Coast (#NeverForgottenCoast) website to tell the stories of people there and to start a program to award micro grants for businesses that are trying to rebuild.

One of the best ways people can help is stop in for a visit, Mr. Workman says. "Go to Mexico Beach. Spend your money, eat lunch, go by a shirt at the pop-up shop." You can also donate to the Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association (below) to help continue this grant program.

You can also find a map of businesses that are open in Mexico Beach, including several restaurants.

For more information, visit [www.neverforgottencoast.com](http://www.neverforgottencoast.com)

>> To help Mexico Beach, donate to the Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association. Being the only nonprofit in town that could accept official donations, the organization changed its bylaws and mission statement so that it can receive them and help the town. The organization

For more information, visit [www.mbara.org/donate.cfm](http://www.mbara.org/donate.cfm)



David Kiser, owner of Caribbean Coffee, one of the first businesses in Mexico Beach to reopen after the storm in November.



Josh Whitfield, 39, is a bartender at the Lookout. He was born and raised in Bay County. "We're resilient," he said.

created by volunteers recounts the stories of business people here. It also provides a map of businesses as they slowly reopen, often operating in temporary spaces or in different buildings.

Those include three restaurants so far: Caribbean Coffee, Crazy Beach Pizza and Mango Marley's. There is also Two Gulls at the Beach (quirky shopping) and Cathey's Hardware and Tackle. The public parking and beach access area near the missing pier are open. Rustic Sands Bar & Grill and RV Park, Wallace Pump & Supply Company, and a few real estate offices are open. And on the west end of town you can visit the #NeverForgottenCoast pop-up shop and town visitors center.

Just down U.S. 98 in Port St. Joe, Lookout Lounge and liquor store offers a familiar refuge and good spirits both in person and liquid form. It offers live music on the weekends and draws a consistent happy hour crowd.

"What's amazing is most people don't even know Hurricane Michael happened here," said Marty Mian, 65, a customer at the bar one day in late April.

The old Lookout was destroyed so owner Tony Whitfield moved it down the street (Highway 98) to a new location where he owned another restaurant. Like many residents, he's waiting in a very long line for a repair on his home.

"I got a blue roof that's real pretty. It matches my eyes," he jokes, referring to the signature tarps now on roofs across the panhandle.

Bartender Josh Whitfield, 39, is a lifetime Bay County resident. He points out that many houses in town were inherited and had no insurance.

"So a lot of 'em can't rebuild," he said. But he adds, simply, "We're resilient."

While nearly anyone you talk to has a brave face, life can still have a surreal post-



Kevin Lanier and Cyndi Lanier at their home about 15 minutes north of Mexico Beach. Ms. Lanier, 51, is an artist specializing in Gyotaku, the Japanese art of printing fish, while Mr. Lanier, 55, is owner and captain of KC Sport-fishing Charter. He is temporarily operating out of Panama City Beach while the Mexico Beach marina is repaired. Mr. Lanier suggested a question for Congress: In comparison with aid given to other areas, why is it taking so much longer to get to Mexico Beach?



Mexico Beach First Baptist Church Pastor Eddie LaFountain and his wife Josie LaFountain in front of the steeple that was blown off their church. Ms. LaFountain misses the thousands of trees that Michael took. "You can't get away from the sun," she said. "And the wind. It's windy and sunny."

MICHAEL

From page 17

Although the damage approached catastrophic levels in some areas, it was overshadowed by other disasters and political bickering, residents say, be it over Puerto Rico's own lack of hurricane aid, California wildfires, or the latest mass shooting. Many believe that Congress will eventually release an aid package that includes Michael as well as other national disasters such as Puerto Rico. But the federal government is taking much longer after Michael than it did with storms such as Andrew, Katrina and Irma to release at least some kind of disaster relief aid package.

Reopening in Mexico Beach

In spite of the damage, Mexico Beach remains a lovely if storm-torn town. A pop-up website called #NeverForgottenCoast ([www.neverforgottencoast.com](http://www.neverforgottencoast.com))

hurricane quality. Some residents who have been there for years said they got lost because so many familiar landmarks are gone. In Bay County, the stresses of dealing with daily life as the effects of the storm drag on is in some ways just starting to peak, said Bay District Schools communications director, Sharon Michalik.

More than one-fifth of the district's 24,000 students now meet the criteria for "homeless," such as those crashing with friends or family or living at a shelter. Before the storm there were 783 students who met the criteria. Now there are 5,500.

Bay District Schools anticipates a \$24.8 million shortfall due to about 3,700 students stopped attending school in the district after the storm (state school funding is per student). It estimates about 600 jobs will be lost.

Ms. Michalik reports that there has been "a dramatic uptick in behavioral and

mental health issues" with school children across all grade levels and that district employees, teachers and parents are also struggling.

"The adults are quite frankly worn out," she said, as they deal with long waits from contractors, insurance adjusters and other challenges while also trying to get back to business.

Many people across the panhandle, where Michael's presence still looms every day, probably feel the same.

"It wears on you," said David Kiser, 64, owner of Caribbean Coffee in Mexico Beach.

A customer had just come in the shop to pick up an order.

"People don't understand how hard it is on your soul," she told him. "Even my dog was depressed for a while." ■