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Atlantic Hurricane Forecast Projects Fewer Storms in 2026, but Still Gives Caribbean 35% Major Landfall Risk

Colorado State researchers forecast 13 named storms, six hurricanes, and two major hurricanes in 2026, but still assign the Caribbean a 35 percent chance of a major hurricane landfall and warn coastal residents to stay prepared.

Hurricane Season / **Published On April 27, 2026 06:28 AM /**

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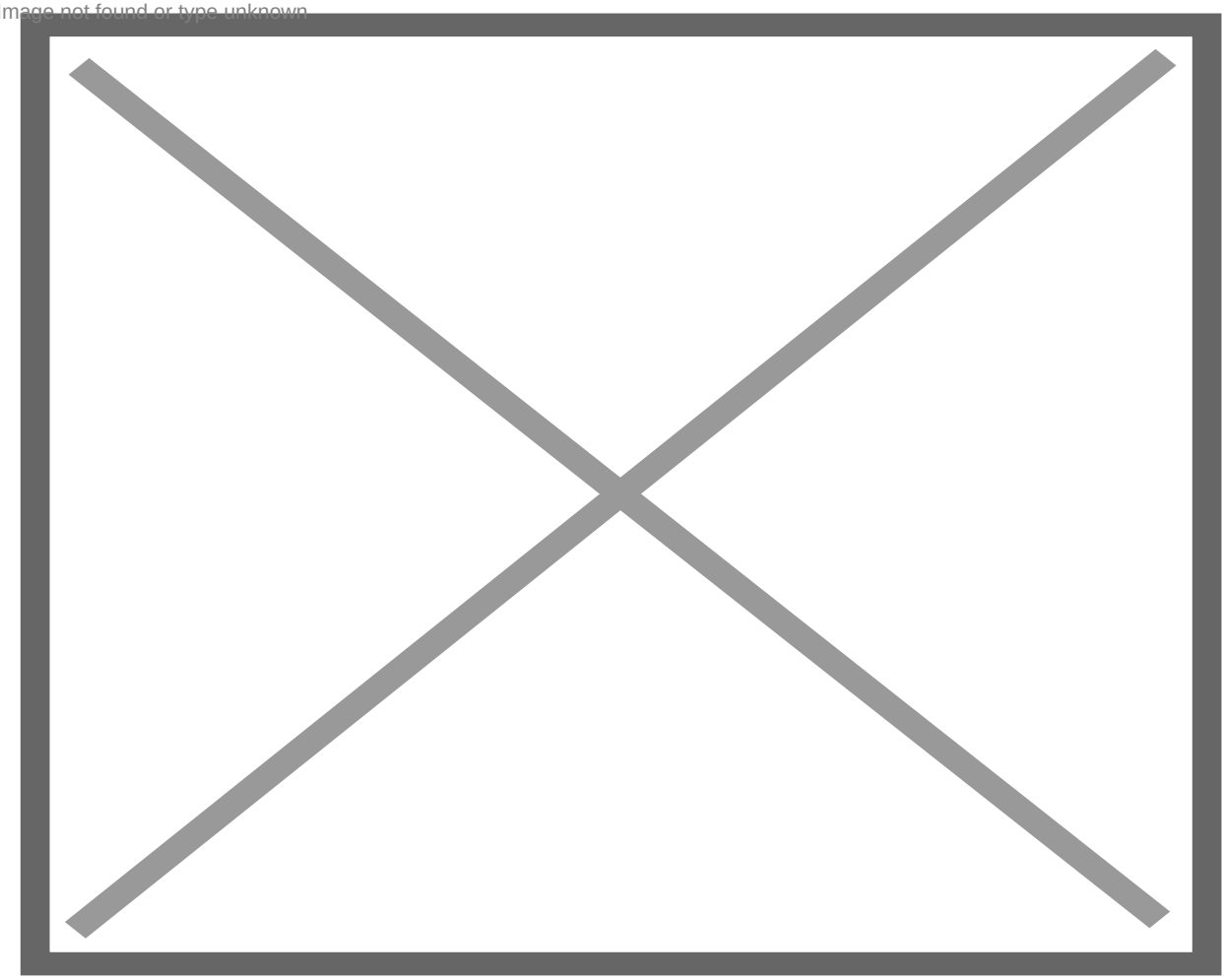

Colorado State University researchers are forecasting a somewhat below-average 2026 Atlantic hurricane season, but are still warning residents in hurricane-prone areas — including the Caribbean — to remain prepared.

In their initial 2026 outlook, the CSU team projects 13 named storms, six hurricanes, and two major hurricanes during the season, while also estimating a 35 percent chance that the Caribbean

will see a major hurricane make landfall.

The forecast covers the Atlantic hurricane season that runs from June 1 through November 30.

CSU's Tropical Cyclones, Radar, Atmospheric Modeling, and Software Team said the main reason for the lower-than-average outlook is the expected development of a robust El Niño. Researchers said El Niño typically increases upper-level westerly winds across the Caribbean and tropical Atlantic, creating vertical wind shear that is unfavorable for hurricane formation and intensification. They noted that moderate to strong El Niño events generally have a greater impact on Atlantic wind shear than weaker events.

At present, the tropical Pacific remains under weak La Niña conditions, which are associated with cooler-than-normal waters in the eastern and central tropical Pacific. However, the CSU team said those conditions are expected to transition rapidly to El Niño over the coming months. While the eventual strength of that El Niño remains uncertain, researchers said a moderate to strong event appears most likely during the peak of the Atlantic season from August through October.

The Atlantic itself is showing mixed signals. Researchers said waters in the western tropical Atlantic are warmer than normal, while waters in the eastern tropical and subtropical Atlantic are slightly cooler than normal. They noted that a warmer Atlantic generally supports more hurricane activity because warm ocean water fuels storms and tends to be associated with lower atmospheric pressure and a more unstable atmosphere. In this case, however, the team said the Atlantic's mixed conditions combined with the likely development of El Niño led them to forecast a somewhat below-normal season.

The researchers also cautioned that their April forecast is historically less accurate than later updates issued closer to the height of the season, because conditions in the ocean and atmosphere can still change significantly between April and August.

According to the forecast, the 2026 season is expected to produce 13 named storms, 55 named storm days, six hurricanes, 20 hurricane days, two major hurricanes, five major hurricane days, an Accumulated Cyclone Energy index of 90, ACE west of 60 degrees west longitude of 50, and Net Tropical Cyclone Activity of 100 percent.

The team said it bases its outlook on a statistical model as well as three other models that use information from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts, the UK Met Office, and the Centro Euro-Mediterraneo sui Cambiamenti Climatici. For the first time this year, the researchers also used a machine learning-based climate model known as the Ai2 Climate Emulator, or ACE2, run with predicted sea surface temperatures from the ECMWF climate model.

Researchers said the statistical model pointed to a slightly above-average season, but all other guidance, including ACE2, suggested somewhat below-average activity.

"So far, the 2026 hurricane season is exhibiting characteristics similar to the 2006, 2009, 2015 and 2023 seasons," said Phil Klotzbach, a senior research scientist in CSU's Department of Atmospheric Science and lead author of the report.

"Our analog seasons ranged from well below-average Atlantic hurricane activity to somewhat above average," said Klotzbach. "While the average of our analog seasons is somewhat below normal, the large spread in observed activity in our analog years highlights the high levels of uncertainty that typically are associated with our early April outlook."

The team estimates that 2026 hurricane activity will be about 75 percent of the average season from 1991 to 2020. By comparison, 2025 activity was about 105 percent of average. The release said the most significant storm of the 2025 season was Hurricane Melissa, which made landfall in Jamaica as a Category 5 hurricane, caused nearly $9 billion in damage, and resulted in 95 deaths across the Caribbean.

The CSU team also issued landfall probabilities for major hurricanes in 2026. It forecast a 32 percent chance for the entire U.S. coastline, compared with a historical average of 43 percent; a 15 percent chance for the U.S. East Coast, including the Florida Peninsula, compared with a 21 percent average; a 20 percent chance for the Gulf Coast from the Florida Panhandle west to Brownsville, Texas, compared with 27 percent historically; and a 35 percent chance for the Caribbean, compared with the long-term average of 47 percent.

The report also highlighted ACE west of 60 degrees west longitude as a key measure because it correlates more closely with landfalling storms than basinwide ACE, since nearly all hurricane-prone landmasses in the Atlantic lie west of that line. Researchers said that in El Niño years, a somewhat smaller share of basinwide ACE tends to occur west of 60 degrees west than in La Niña years, and they expect that to be the case again in 2026.

The research team said it will update the outlook on June 10, July 8, and August 5.

This is the 43rd year that CSU has issued an Atlantic hurricane forecast. The seasonal forecast program was started in 1984 by the late Professor Emeritus Bill Gray, who continued authoring the reports until his death in 2016.

The researchers stressed that the forecast is meant to provide a best estimate of seasonal activity, not an exact measure, and urged coastal residents to take precautions regardless of the projected totals.

“It takes only one storm near you to make this an active season for you,” said Michael Bell.