

Get 4 FREE trial issues >>

Subscribe

Student offers

The Economist

Log in | Register | My account

Newsletters | RSS | Subscribe | Classifieds

Thursday July 8th 2010

Home | World | Business & Finance | Science & Technology | Economics | Culture | Site Index | Print Edition
All World | United States | Britain | Europe | Asia | Americas | Africa | Middle East

Hurricane season

Trouble brewing

Storms in the Gulf of Mexico will complicate the oil-spill clean-up

Jul 8th 2010 | HOUSTON

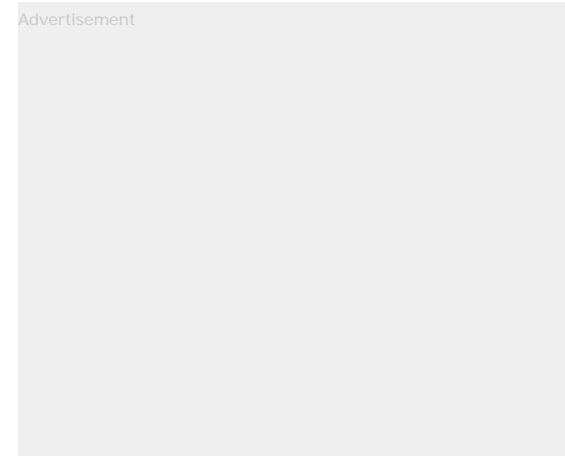


It's that time of year again

THE first serious storm of this year's Atlantic hurricane season, which officially began on June 1st, was Alex. It came furiously across the gulf, hitting Mexico's north-east coast as a category two hurricane. The flooding it caused was serious, and 12 people died, but watchers had feared much worse. A bit farther north, and Alex would have hit the big twin cities of Matamoros, in Mexico, and Brownsville, in Texas.

Meteorologists expect this year's hurricane season to be more active than the average, because of warm waters in the gulf and atmospheric conditions. Last summer the waters were similarly warm, but the effects of El Niño in the atmosphere over the ocean dredged up high winds and made it harder for tropical storms to form. The National

- Be the first to comment
Recommend
E-mail
Share
Print
Reprints & permissions



Products & events

Stay informed today and every day

Subscribe to The Economist's free e-mail newsletters and alerts.

Get e-mail newsletters

Subscribe to The Economist's latest article postings on Twitter

Follow The Economist on Twitter

See a selection of The Economist's articles, events, topical videos and debates on Facebook.

[+] Feedback

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reckons that for 2010 there is a 70% chance of between eight and 14 hurricanes, three to seven of which could be big ones. As the experts are fond of saying, it only takes one.

For the gulf coast states, which are still in recovery after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (2005), and Hurricane Ike (2008), the assessment is ominous. The advice is much the same as usual: have your insurance paperwork in order, know your escape route, and watch out for the water as much as the wind. "Keep in mind that storm surge is a killing mechanism," says Walt Zaleski, a warning-co-ordination meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Fort Worth, Texas.

And this year the oil spill has added its own complications. Ron Kendall, an environmental toxicologist at Texas Tech University, explains that Hurricane Alex has already derailed the clean-up effort by at least a week. The storm passed west of the spill, whirling counter-clockwise, as all hurricanes do in the northern hemisphere. The skimmers were rendered useless and the workers had to be evacuated. The high winds and waves slogged oily water over the miles of containment boom that have been strung around Louisiana's fragile coastline. Several days after Alex made landfall, tarballs started turning up in Lake Pontchartrain, which flanks the northern side of New Orleans.

A thick slick of oil on the sea could, in theory, limit a hurricane by acting as a sort of shield—preventing the water from evaporating into the storm. According to the NOAA, the current spill is too patchy to do that. Piers Chapman, an oceanographer at Texas A&M University, says there is also a possibility that strong winds will help scatter the oil, hastening its evaporation. That is small consolation, given the scale of the environmental catastrophe. BP is still at work drilling two relief wells to siphon off the oil that is still gushing out. The first, according to the company, will be complete in August. It could even happen a little earlier. Barring any further delays, that is.

United States

[↑ Recommend](#) [✉ E-mail](#) [+ Share](#) [🖨 Print](#) [📄 Reprints & permissions](#)

Readers' comments

The Economist welcomes your views.

[✍ Be the first to comment](#)



Want more? Subscribe to *The Economist* and get the week's most relevant news and analysis.

Classified ads



[f Follow *The Economist* on Facebook](#)

Advertisement



We are making continuous improvements to *The Economist* website and are interested in your thoughts.

Please leave your feedback.

Discover
the Health
of Nations →



[About *The Economist* online](#) | [About *The Economist*](#) | [Media directory](#) | [Staff books](#) | [Career opportunities](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Subscribe](#)

[\[+\] Site feedback](#)

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2010. All rights reserved. | [Advertising info](#) | [Legal disclaimer](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#)

[Help](#)