

Tornado, strong winds hit Alabama ahead of major Southeastern storms

Severe winds, including at least one tornado, damaged buildings in northern and eastern Alabama on Monday ahead of powerful spring storms that were expected to cause significant damage Tuesday across a large part of the Southeast, authorities and forecasters said.

Officials at Jacksonville State University in Calhoun County, about 60 miles northeast of Birmingham, reported major damage to the roofs of the school's basketball arena and two of its freshman dormitories, Patterson and Logan halls.

No injuries were immediately confirmed at the college, which is on spring break. University police were going door to door to check on any students who may have been on campus, the school said late Monday.



Residents salvage what they can after severe storms Monday in Ardmore, Alabama. Crystal Vander Weit/Decatur Daily via AP

The National Weather Service confirmed that a large tornado hit the area at about 8:40 p.m. (9:40 p.m. ET). Jacksonville fire officials said that numerous homes had sustained significant damage and that fire crews were working to clear roads to get to anyone who may have been trapped in the wreckage.

Calhoun County Sheriff Matthew Wade said West Point Baptist Church was destroyed. The county Board of Education said all schools would be closed on Tuesday.

A possible tornado was also reported Monday afternoon in Franklin County, in the northern part of the state. The state Emergency Management Agency said Monday night that almost all city buses and many police vehicles were extensively damaged in the town of Cullman, near Huntsville, where more than 1,000 customers were without power.

The fire department and a Waffle House restaurant were damaged in Russellville, NBC affiliate WAFF of Huntsville reported, while homes, trees and power lines were damaged in Ardmore in nearby Limestone County.



Scattered debris covers the ground in Ardmore, Alabama, on March 19. Severe storms that spawned tornadoes damaged homes and downed trees as they moved across the Southeast on Monday night. Johnny Tribble / via AP

On the front end of the system, heavy rain, wind and thunderstorms caused

flooding in parts of metropolitan Atlanta, NBC affiliate WXIA reported. Tornado watches and severe thunderstorm warnings were in effect near midnight in several counties in the northern and central parts of the state, where utilities reported that more than 50,000 customers were without power at 1 a.m. ET.

The National Weather Service said the storms were caused by warm, humid air and low pressure across the lower Mississippi valley on Monday. A cold front tracking in the system's wake was expected to spread heavy rain and winds, with some damaging tornadoes likely, across the Southeast on Tuesday, it said.

"This is an ongoing threat," said Heather Tesch, a meteorologist for The Weather Channel, who said the brunt of the system would likely be centered on northern and central Florida and the coasts of Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina.

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