



"It looked like a big chain saw went through and chopped everything in half," David Clark, deputy secretary for recreation and land at the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, said. | Bruce Ritchie/POLITICO

## Hurricane leaves state parks with 'life-changing' damage

By **BRUCE RITCHIE** | 10/19/2018 05:00 AM EDT

MARIANNA — Hurricane Michael's fierce winds seemed indiscriminate when the storm arrived here last week, toppling thousands of trees across Florida Caverns State Park and leaving the 1,300-acre recreation area covered in a mess of twisted branches and logs.

It's just one example of the destruction Michael brought to the region. As people across storm-torn parts of the Panhandle try to pick up their lives, the damage done to a handful of state parks could deepen the economic losses.

The storm, which may have brought tornadoes to this small North Florida city 70 miles from Mexico Beach, ripped roofs off of homes and the facades of downtown buildings. And in the park, the winds snapped tree trunks like twigs and uprooted others, blocking the main park drive and access to the caverns.

"It looked like a big chain saw went through and chopped everything in half," David Clark, deputy secretary for recreation and land at the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, said outside the park entrance on Wednesday as workers began the overwhelming task of clearing the debris.

Florida closed 71 state parks in advance of the storm, and all but 14 had reopened by Thursday. But at least 10 of those parks will remain closed indefinitely, including Florida Caverns and the popular St. Andrews State Park in Panama City Beach, as well as St. George Island near Apalachicola and St. Joseph Peninsula State Park near Port St. Joe.

The cost of the closures will include more than just the price of cleanup. Florida's state parks have a \$3 billion annual economic impact and support 48,000 jobs, according to one state study. Every 1,000 visitors to state parks, the study found, adds another \$94,000 in economic benefit for local communities.

The most dramatic park damage may be at St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, where the storm surge sliced the narrow peninsula and beach road into three separate pieces, as shown by NOAA images.

At St. George Island State Park, parts of the main park drive have been washed away. Other sections are covered with sugar-white sand from the flattened dunes that previously lined the Gulf beach.

Other closed parks include Falling Waters, Three Rivers, Torreya and St. Andrews State Park in Panama City Beach, where Clark said the roofs were lifted off park gazebos during the storm.

The state park system has been through this drill before.

Last year, Hurricane Irma forced the closure of all but six of Florida's 174 state parks. The massive hurricane hit the Florida Keys with 130 mph winds before moving north through the peninsula.

That storm caused \$65 million in damage to state parks, including extensive damage in the Florida Keys to some of the state's most popular parks, such as John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park and Bahia Honda State Park.

Park attendance dropped from a record 32.2 million in fiscal 2016-17 to 28.2 million this past year as the state recovered from Hurricane Irma, according to the DEP.

In the 2018-19 state budget, the Legislature provided an additional \$10 million for storm repairs, Clark said. The park system also received \$35 million for land management and facility improvement, with most of the funds going toward Hurricane Irma damage.

Clark said Wednesday he can't estimate yet the cost of damage to state parks caused by Hurricane Michael. And he said he doesn't know whether it will be less than Irma, with only the smaller rural Panhandle region affected by Michael.

But it's clear already that some parks will require extensive work before fully reopening. Some may only reopen partially, for day use, until campgrounds and trails are cleared and repaired, Clark said.

In St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, work crews will need to fill new channels to provide access to the campgrounds and nature trail that now are cut off from the park entrance. One channel is about 200 yards wide and 30 feet deep, and the other is about 50 feet wide and knee-deep, state park officials said.

A major difference between Irma and Michael, Clark said, is that this latest storm left Panhandle parks away from the coast, such as Florida Caverns and Torreya, with huge numbers of downed trees. South Florida's parks are not so heavily forested.

In addition to blocking the park drive at Florida Caverns, the fallen trees also may have punched holes in the cavern ceilings, Clark said. The caverns have been flooded since the hurricane and cannot be explored yet to determine the damage.

The bathrooms at Blue Hole remained untouched by the fallen pines, but parts of the metal roof of a nearby picnic shelter were blown off. A sewage-like stench wafted from what had been a popular swimming area before the storm.

The park's visitor center, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps before the park's opening in 1942, remained intact, as did — ironically — the bronze statue of bare-chested CCC worker with an axe at his side.

Rather than wielding axes, work crews on Wednesday used chain saws along the park drive and visitor parking lot to cut up trees, which then were moved aside by a tractor with a grappling mechanism.

The sound of saws could resonate through the park for days and perhaps weeks before all the debris is cleared, park officials said. Fallen trees cover much of the 1,300 acres.

Asked to describe the damage, longtime park manager Jacob Strickland said it was hard to find the words. He said he can now see straight across what used to be a forest, spotting a distant traffic light and a bank in Marianna.

"When you can see hilltop to hilltop ... that's life-changing," Strickland said.

State forestry officials, Clark said, are inspecting damaged parks to decide which trees need to be hauled away to reduce fuel for wildfires and which can be left in place.

"The challenge here is with the volume of vegetative debris on the ground," Clark said. "What we need to do is get it out."

Another priority, Clark said, is helping park employees find homes after they were displaced from the park cabins where they lived. The Florida State Park Foundation has set up a fund for donations to help parks and their employees recover after the storm.

Clark, before leaving Florida Caverns to visit to hard-hit St. Andrews State Park, said the forest will regrow and the park system will recover from the damage, as it has from prior storms.

While the disappointment to park visitors doesn't match the human suffering, Clark said state parks play a vital role in lives of many — for family picnics and reunions, regional festivals or weekend getaways.

They're another reminder of how many lives Hurricane Michael touched.

"They (residents) support the parks and the parks support them — it's incredibly connected," he said. "For us, it's important that we bring parks back online, almost like a beacon of light for communities to say that 'we're here to support you,' that we're open."

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