

# Researchers evacuated from atoll as storm nears

By Audrey McAvoy  
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Seven researchers were evacuated from a remote atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a powerful hurricane headed their way, officials said Wednesday.

A research vessel picked up the seven from French Frigate Shoals, said Kate Toniolo, the acting superintendent of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

The atoll is about 500 miles northwest of Honolulu. Hurricane Walaka was south of the island on Wednesday and heading north with maximum sustained winds of 130 mph.

On Monday the Coast Guard evacuated four workers from a national wildlife refuge on Johnston Atoll before Walaka passed that island.

The storm hasn't threatened Hawaii's most populous islands, where the state's 1.4 million people live.

The French Frigate Shoals researchers were studying and monitoring Hawaiian monk seals and Hawaiian green sea turtles, Toniolo said. They were due to leave the island in the middle of this month, so the

evacuation accelerated their departure, she said.

Amanda Dillon, scientific content coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said the research vessel picked up the team on Sunday after being diverted from a project near Kauai. The ship returned to Honolulu on Tuesday.

French Frigate Shoals is where 95 percent of Hawaiian green sea turtles — classified as threatened under the Endangered Species Act — nest.

The turtles dig holes on the beach and lay their eggs in the sand, so there's a possibility a storm surge from the hurricane may wipe out their nests. Storm surges also may hit Hawaiian monk seals that rest on the shoreline with their pups. The seals are an endangered species.

Toniolo said researchers won't return to the island until next year. But a crew collecting marine debris in the marine monument might stop by and check for damage before then.

Laura Beauregard of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said the hurricane poses similar concerns for Johnston Atoll, which is about 825 miles southwest of Honolulu. Johnston is the lone nesting spot for tens of thousands of seabirds within 450,000 square miles, she said.