Forecasters up hurricane predictions

As Tropical Storm Emily fizzed over the mountainous terrain of Hispaniola on Thursday, hurricane forecasters upped their predictions for storm activity this year.

That's because Atlantic Ocean temperatures remain exceptionally warm — the third warmest on record - and wind shear is generally quite low across the tropics. "The atmosphere and Atlantic Ocean are primed for high hurricane activity during August through October," said Gerry Bell, lead seasonal hurricane forecaster for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. On Thursday, NOAA raised its expectation for named storms during the Atlantic hurricane season from a range of 12 to 18 named storms, to 14 to 19 named storms. That's partly because the season is off to a cracking start. There have already been five named storms this year in the Atlantic, when during a normal storm season, only two would have formed by early August. Hurricane season begins June 1 and ends November 30, but the bulk of the activity comes between mid-August and mid-October. There are signs this season may be similar to 2008 because atmospheric patterns setting up across the Atlantic, Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico are similar, said Chris Hebert, a hurricane forecaster with ImpactWeather, a Houston-based service. In 2008, there were four named storms as of the first week of August. Three years ago, Hurricane Dolly struck the lower Texas coast in late July, and this year, Tropical Storm Don struck the lower Texas coast in late July. Whether Houston will get a large hurricane this year, like Ike in 2008, is not knowable at this point. But there's a chance, Hebert said. The massive high pressure system that has positioned itself over Texas for much of the summer is not showing any signs of leaving in the next three to four weeks. "Of course, that means our severe drought may continue at least through August," he said. A pattern change next month might increase rain chances, but it would also raise the area's tropical risks. "Unfortunately, the high pressure area is going to be weakening as we move into September and fall approaches," Hebert said. "That's when the northwest Gulf of Mexico, including the upper Texas coast through Louisiana, may be most likely to be impacted." As in the open Atlantic, the Gulf is extremely warm, so any hurricane moving across it will have an ample heat source to draw upon.