

Coastal downwelling intensifies landfalling hurricanes

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Key Points

- 1) Hurricanes approaching land tend to force downwelling over ocean shelves, especially when they move toward or with the coast to their right.
- 2) Coastal downwelling sustains warmer shelf sea-surface temperatures (SSTs), even when storm-induced ocean mixing might otherwise cool SSTs.
- 3) Sustained shelf SSTs increase air-sea contrasts and enthalpy (heat and moisture) fluxes contributing directly to larger or slower-moving hurricanes' intensification near landfall.

Abstract

This study demonstrates a link between coastal downwelling and tropical cyclone (TC) intensification. We show coastal downwelling increases air-sea enthalpy (heat, moisture) fluxes ahead of TCs approaching land, creating conditions conducive to intensification even in the presence of typically inhibiting factors like strong vertical wind shear. The study uses a coupled TC model (HWRF-B) and buoy observations to demonstrate that coastal downwelling developed as three TCs in 2020 approached land. Results show downwelling maintained warmer sea-surface temperatures over the ocean shelf, enhancing air-sea temperature/humidity contrasts. We found that in such cases resulting air-sea enthalpy fluxes can replenish the boundary-layer even when cool, dry air intrudes, as in sheared storms and storms approaching continental land-masses. Resulting warm, moist air is advected into the TC inner core, enhancing convective development, thus providing energy for TC intensification. These results indicate coastal downwelling can be important in forecasting TC intensity change before landfall.

Plain Language Summary

We examined forecasts for three hurricanes in 2020 that intensified near landfall. Using a coupled air-sea hurricane model, we found that tropical storm-force winds blowing parallel to the coast forced water near the ocean surface to move toward shore. Winds often blow parallel to the coast when tropical cyclones (hurricanes) are near land. The model showed that this onshore transport caused water levels to rise near the coastal boundary - a process called coastal Ekman convergence. This convergence forced water downward along the sloping seafloor and back away from shore, forming a circular exchange of water between the shelf and the open ocean; this exchange is called coastal downwelling. We demonstrate that incipient coastal downwelling brought warmer surface water over the shelf, heating and adding moisture to the air and thus providing more energy to these tropical cyclones. We further show that this additional energy provided by coastal downwelling can contribute to intensification of larger or slower-moving tropical cyclones before landfall. This result suggests that it is important to validate the modeling of coastal downwelling in future forecast models, in order to reliably forecast tropical cyclone intensity near landfall.

Index Terms: 3372, 4504, 4534, 4217, 4219

Keywords: landfalling hurricanes, coastal downwelling, shelf oceanography, rapid intensification, tropical cyclones, air-sea enthalpy flux

1. Introduction

In 2009 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) established the 10-year Hurricane Forecast Improvement Program (HFIP; Gopalakrishnan et al. 2021) in part to increase tropical cyclone (TC) forecast accuracy and reliability, especially before landfall. Predicting intensity changes in TCs, particularly rapid intensification (RI; Kaplan et al. 2015), is a complex, multiscale problem. This paper discusses a little-explored mechanism - coastal downwelling - by which some TCs intensify before landfall, even under otherwise unfavorable conditions.

Many studies have shown high sea surface temperatures (SSTs) provide the necessary energy for TCs by increasing air-sea enthalpy (heat/moisture) fluxes, resulting in more sustained eyewall convection, warmer cores, lower central pressures, and stronger maximum winds (Emanuel et al. 2004; Jaimes et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2020a; 2020b). Simultaneously, stronger near-surface winds impede TC intensification in two ways: frictional dissipation (Wang and Xu 2010) and SST cooling.

A primary mechanism for SST cooling are cold wakes that TCs can create over the open ocean (e.g., Bender and Ginis 2000). Such wakes result from entrainment of cooler water into the oceanic mixed layer, and upwelling (rising ocean isotherms) due to divergence of near-surface ocean currents. Resultant SST cooling can significantly weaken TCs (Walker et al. 2014; Guo et al. 2020), particularly slower-moving (e.g., translation speed <2 m/s) and larger ones (radius of maximum winds >50 km; Halliwell et al. 2015).

Several studies of SST change and its influence on TC intensity have also focused on processes over the ocean shelf. Specifically, Glenn et al. (2016) and Seroka et al. (2017) detailed shear-driven vertical ocean-mixing ahead of TC Irene that cooled SSTs over the shelf, inhibiting Irene's intensity. Additionally, coastal downwelling (depression of ocean isotherms), which can sustain SSTs, has been studied by Dzwonkowski et al. (2020) and Miles et al. (2017). Dzwonkowski et al. (2020) observed coastal-ocean warming of ~ 2.5 °C associated with passage of TC Gordon (2018). Miles et al. (2017) provided dynamical details of coastal downwelling induced by TC Sandy. Studies have also analyzed coastal-ocean processes associated with western Pacific typhoons, e.g., Sun et al. (2014), Kuo et al. (2014), Zhang et al. (2019, 2021).

Environmental vertical wind shear (VWS) in most cases weakens TCs (Wong and Chan 2004; Wang et al. 2015). This occurs through several processes: vortex-center misalignment (Kaplan et al. 2015), mid-level dry-air intrusion into inner cores (Bhalachandran et al. 2019; Tang and Emanuel 2010), divergent upper-tropospheric fluxes of entropy and potential energy (Riemer et al. 2010), and downdrafts of cool, dry air into TC boundary layers (e.g., Bhalachandran et al., 2019; Riemer et al. 2010; Tang and Emanuel 2012). Forecasters typically expect TCs experiencing significant VWS to weaken, particularly those also impacted by ocean cooling.

When approaching landfall, however, TCs sometimes intensify despite ocean mixing, VWS, and the negative effects of land interaction. Hurricane intensification is a multiscale problem which involves nonlinear interactions between ocean and atmosphere. In this study, we establish how three landfalling TCs (Sally, Hanna, and Eta) over the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico in 2020 intensified before landfall; we highlight the role of coastal downwelling in that intensification. We used the ocean-coupled Basin-scale Hurricane Weather Research and Forecast (HWRF-B) system (Alaka et al. 2020; see also Methods below) together with observations collected from NOAA buoys, to test three hypotheses:

- 1) TCs approaching land tend to force coastal downwelling over the shelf, especially when the coast lies to their right or ahead of their forward motion.
- 2) Coastal downwelling can sustain warmer SSTs over the shelf, even when TC-induced ocean vertical mixing and air-sea fluxes might otherwise cool SSTs.
- 3) Sustained SSTs and resulting air-sea contrasts over the shelf enhance enthalpy fluxes, contributing directly to TC intensification near landfall, particularly for larger or slower-moving TCs.

2. Methods

The model used in this study was Basin-scale HWRF (HWRF-B; Zhang et al. 2016; Alaka et al. 2017, 2019, 2020). HWRF-B uses a fixed single outer domain at 13.5 and telescoping moving nests for each TC at 4.5 and 1.5 km horizontal resolution, but was otherwise configured identically with operational HWRF, including ensemble data-assimilation. HWRF-B is coupled to ocean model MIPOM-TC (Yablonsky et al. 2015) initialized with a two-day spinup from the Real-Time Ocean Forecasting System (Mehra and Rivin 2010). Details of the coupled model configuration together with fuller references are included in the Supplemental Information. Three case studies from the 2020 Atlantic hurricane season were evaluated: Sally, Hanna, and Eta. Each interacted extensively with the ocean shelf and experienced intensification while approaching landfall. Model fields were analyzed at forecast-hours before and immediately after intensification (Supporting Information Table S1). We evaluated shelf currents and sea temperatures in MIPOM-TC using quality-controlled buoy observations from NOAA's National Data Buoy Center (NDBC 2009; Winant et al. 1994) for TC Sally. Further details of the model and buoy data are provided in Supplemental Information.

3. Results

Figure 1 shows the effect of downwelling-favorable shelf winds (i.e., local surface winds blowing parallel to and with the coastline on their right) on near-surface ocean currents and sea-surface elevation. Downwelling-favorable winds, which may be common when TCs are near land, force surface Ekman transport toward the lateral boundary of the coast. Over time, this transport results in a sea-surface elevation “bulge” over the shelf due to surface-current convergence. This bulge is the precondition for coastal downwelling.

The left panels in Figure 1 show convergence and the bulge already well-developed before intensification. After intensification (right column), sea-surface elevation for Sally (Figure 1b) and Hanna (Figure 1d) continued to increase dramatically: As the TCs approached landfall, low sea-level pressure also enhanced storm surge, further increasing elevation. For Eta, wind-speed increase just before landfall was small but surface-current convergence continued to increase through landfall (Figure 1f), consistent with the other cases.

Figure 2 contrasts TC coastal downwelling's effects on sea temperature and ocean currents with the effects of the TC wake in the open ocean: over the shelf, isotherms sloped downward and SSTs were warmer (left and middle columns), consistent with a developing downwelling front. In Sally particularly (Figure 2a), the shelf effect was apparent along the entire west Florida shelf following the storm's passage. The middle column of Figure 2 shows side views (vertical profiles) of coastal downwelling effects on temperature and ocean currents. Downwelling circulation advected warm water shoreward and then downward, depressing ocean isotherms over the shelf; upward return flows are also apparent offshore. The black contour shows depression of the isotherm for 26 °C, a critical temperature threshold for TC intensification (Cione and Uhlhorn 2003; Cione 2015). By contrast, sections into each storm's wake (right column) show upwelling (due to Ekman divergence) and energetic mixing causing SST cooling.

To evaluate our ocean model's reliability, Figure S1 in the Supporting Information compares modeled temperatures and currents with buoy observations from the Gulf of Mexico during Sally's passage. Near-surface sea temperatures from a deep-ocean buoy (Figure S1b) experienced a rapid decline of $>1.5\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C d}^{-1}$ during TC passage, showing the developing cold wake; however, multiple buoys on the shelf (Figure S1c shows one example) recorded markedly slower declines of $0.2\text{--}0.4\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C d}^{-1}$ consistent with SST sustenance from downwelling. Figures S1d and S1e show a close correspondence between near-surface currents in the forecast and available buoy observations on the west Florida shelf.

Figure S2 demonstrates the persistence of downwelling-favorable winds over the shelf for each case. Shading in the right-hand panels shows the length of time, divided by the local inertial period, when alongshore winds of $>5\text{ kts}$ were blowing with the coast on their right: downwelling-favorable winds blew over the shelf for from one to three times the local inertial period in each case, consistent with the full development of downwelling as described in Austin and Lentz (2002). Additional profile snapshots in Figure S3 show development of convergence and the resulting downwelling (isotherm depression) on the shelf. Figure S4 and Figure S5 are depth-vs.-time Hovmöller diagrams at points on the outer shelf near the center of each region of sustained SST. Together they show that vertical ocean mixing tended to smooth vertical gradients in near-surface temperature and salinity, particularly as each TC approached nearest that point. However, these figures also show that, prior to each TC's approach, downwelling-driven isotherm depression and cross-shelf lateral heat-transport meant that vertical mixing resulted in very little surface cooling. Figure S6 shows lower-salinity water near the surface for each case. Figures S5a and S6a show that a low-salinity lens likely inhibited vertical mixing in Sally, although it may also have allowed downwelling to extend shoreward (Lentz 2001;

Csanady 1982). However, for Hanna and Eta, the figures show that the locations of low-salinity lenses did not coincide with the regions of highest sustained SST (Figure 2) and enhanced air-sea enthalpy flux (Figure 3); thus, barrier layers likely did not play a role in these two cases.

Figure 3 shows positive total (latent+sensible) air-sea enthalpy fluxes over the shelf, which potentially aided intensification of each TC despite moderate-to-strong deep-layer (200-850 hPa; Table S1) VWS and surface wind-field asymmetries. The enthalpy fluxes prior to intensification (left panels) were more prominent over the shelf than over deeper water. Peak heat fluxes per grid-point for Sally, Hanna, and Eta were 1128, 1223, and 1570 Wm^{-2} , respectively; all these peaks occurred over the shelf.

The enhanced shelf fluxes illustrated coastal downwelling's impact on air-sea temperature and humidity contrasts before intensification. For although asymmetries were apparent in both enthalpy fluxes and surface-wind fields, areas of enhanced enthalpy flux in all panels corresponded with areas of large air-sea humidity and temperature contrasts over the shelf, and not always with areas of the strongest surface winds (not shown). Thus, shelf-based energy fluxes resulted from higher SSTs over the shelf rather than simple wind asymmetries. These asymmetric fluxes counterintuitively led to a more symmetrized TC after intensification (Figure 3 right panels).

Figure 4 shows cool, dry air of low equivalent potential temperature (θ_e) carried by downdrafts and coastal winds into the boundary layer of each storm. Enthalpy fluxes over the shelf (Figure 3) replenished boundary-layer heat and moisture; this increased θ_e in the 6-12 h between the left and right panels of Figure 4, even for strongly sheared storms Sally and Eta. During intensification, surface air flow along the streamlines shown in Figure 4 transported higher- θ_e air into the inner core of each storm, enhancing mid-level and deep convection and resulting in symmetrization and intensification just before landfall.

Figures 3 and 4 show that axisymmetrization and contraction preceded TC intensification, consistent with Chen et al. (2018) and Wadler et al. (2021). Advection of entropy-replenished boundary-layer air into the inner core enhanced eyewall convection and drove diabatic heating, which is favorable for symmetric intensification of the TC vortex (Chen et al. 2018), especially when located inside the radius of maximum winds (e.g. Vigh and Schubert 2009; Chen and Gopalakrishnan, 2015). But all three TCs moved relatively slowly (Table S1), which would have been expected both to increase the effect of the cold wake on fluxes over deeper water and to allow VWS to exacerbate initial asymmetries, weakening these TCs. The subsequent intensification of each storm, despite these effects, was remarkable and largely attributable to the shelf effect.

In Figure 5, we evaluate the simplified energy budget terms (Eq. S1). Change in total kinetic energy and in maximum 10 m winds for all three storms positively correlated with the difference between total enthalpy fluxes and frictional dissipation. Enthalpy fluxes over the shelf region constituted an important fraction of the total fluxes (30-90%) leading up to and during

intensification. Increases in kinetic energy lagged increases in surface fluxes by 6-12 h, suggesting that surface enthalpy fluxes lead to TC intensity change.

Peaks in total enthalpy flux preceded an intensification of 15 ms^{-1} in 36 h for Sally (Figure 5a) and the RI (Kaplan and DeMaria 2003) of 16 ms^{-1} in 18 h for Hanna (Figure 5b); the shelf effect contributed a majority of the total flux in both cases. Although Eta intensified largely over the open ocean, it encountered insular and continental shelf water starting in hour 72, deriving 30-40% of its flux from the shelf as it approached maximum forecast intensity near landfall (Figure 5c). These shelf fluxes occurred in both the inner and outer core of Eta (Figure 3e). High enthalpy fluxes in all three cases supported boundary-layer recovery of downdraft-induced low-entropy air upshear, before that air entered updrafts in the downshear quadrant (Figure 4), leading to TC intensification. This process thus countered the negative effects of shear and ventilation on intensity (Figure 5).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper investigated coastal downwelling in three hurricane case-studies using the coupled HWRF-B/MPIMOM-TC modeling system. Coastal downwelling develops when surface winds blow with the land to their right in the Northern Hemisphere for a sufficient period (Austin and Lentz 2002; Sreenivas and Gnanaseelan 2014; Kuo et al. 2014; Shen et al. 2017; Zhang et al. 2019). We found that downwelling-favorable winds, blowing for more than a local inertial period, forced coastal downwelling ahead of each TC. We further found that the coastal downwelling associated with each TC sustained SSTs over the shelf, consistent with other studies focused on non-TC conditions (e.g., Choboter et al. 2011). Shelf circulation during typhoons in the western north Pacific has been observed to sustain SSTs (Kuo et al. 2014, Zhang et al. 2019, Zhang et al. 2021), while coastal downwelling in particular has been implicated in TC intensification by some studies of Atlantic hurricanes (Miles et al. 2017; Dzwonkowski et al. 2020).

Our results contrast with those of previous studies, including Glenn et al. (2016), which showed cooling over the Mid-Atlantic Bight during passage of Hurricane Irene (2011). In that case and some others reviewed by Glenn et al., near-bottom regions on the shelf harbored pools of cooler water before storm passage, and TCs approached with the coast on their left. In our case studies, water near the shelf-floor prior to storm passage was generally above 26°C out to the 50 m isobath (Figure 2, Supplemental Figure S2), and each TC approached the shelf with land on its right or ahead of it. Our analysis thus suggests that, for a number of cases in 2020, shear-driven vertical mixing could not compensate for coastal downwelling's effects.

We established a direct link between SST sustenance, enhanced enthalpy fluxes, and intensification for these three Atlantic TCs. Despite dry-air intrusion due to persistent shear, enhanced air-sea enthalpy fluxes, resulting from warmer SSTs over the shelf, caused the TCs to intensify before landfall. Surface wind-field forecasts and observations (figures omitted) showed warmer, moister air in the boundary layers being carried into the inner cores over a

period of 6-12 h; increases in both total kinetic energy and surface winds followed within another 6-12 h. A detailed understanding of the vortex spin-up process will be carried out in a later work.

A simplified energy budget showed that peaks in the residual of air-sea enthalpy flux minus frictional dissipation correlated with maximum TC intensity, similar to results for peak intensity found by Wang and Xu (2010). The lag of 12-18 h between peak air-sea enthalpy flux and maximum TC intensity was consistent with idealized modeling studies (Halliwell et al. 2015). Our results support the conclusion that surface enthalpy fluxes are important for TC intensity change, constituting an energy source sufficient to compensate for energy loss due to frictional dissipation (Emanuel 1986). Similarly, we find agreement with Zhang et al. (2017) that the influence of surface enthalpy fluxes for TC intensification hinges on their role in boundary-layer recovery. The novel result here is the importance of air-sea enthalpy fluxes due particularly to TC-driven coastal downwelling.

Future work will examine the relationship between shelf-fluxes and storm structure (wind-field sizes), which may constitute an important component of TC response to the shelf effect. Future work will also examine boundary-layer recovery mechanisms within the TC core, potentially using idealized studies. Finally, a recent study suggests insolation differences related to cloud-cover may be important for TC intensification near landfall (Lok et al. 2021); we will extend the energy budget discussed here (Eq. S1) to consider insolation in addition to terms for potential- and internal-energy advection.

This study demonstrated that the coupled HWRF-B/MPIM-TC system appropriately modeled important coastal- and shelf-ocean dynamics related to TC intensification, namely the shelf effect due to coastal downwelling. We further showed this oceanographic process can impact boundary-layer recovery, atmospheric convection, and TC intensity. Three TCs from just one basin and hurricane season (2020 North Atlantic) were impacted by coastal downwelling; other cases from the 2017-2020 North Atlantic and eastern North Pacific hurricane seasons are being analyzed to determine the relative prevalence of this shelf effect in causing intensification of landfalling TCs.

Future model-observational studies should analyze other oceanographic mechanisms that may contribute to the shelf effect, including barrier-layer intensification (Balaguru et al. 2020, Rudzin et al. 2020) as well as coastal-trapped and continental shelf waves (Shen et al. 2021). Examining implications of the shelf effect for TCs in a changing climate is also important (Emanuel 2017). Finally, future work must evaluate how the shelf effect can impact coastal communities and marine ecosystems, e.g., from enhanced bottom temperatures and cross-shore transports (Dzwonkowski et al. 2020).

Above all, this study establishes the importance of coastal downwelling in increasing storm intensity before landfall. To ensure reliable intensity forecasts for landfalling TCs, we recommend modeling of the shelf effect be validated in future upgrades of operational coupled TC forecast models, such as the Hurricane Analysis and Forecast System (HAFS; Hazelton et al. 2022) now under development by HFIP (Gall et al. 2013).

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Data Availability

The numerical model simulations upon which this study is based are available via public FTP at https://storm.aoml.noaa.gov/users/lgramer/Gramer_2022_1_data.tgz. Further information on these outputs from the model simulations is available from Dr. Lew Gramer at CIMAS - NOAA/AOML/HRD (lew.gramer@noaa.gov). In addition, HWRF is a community model with a code repository that is publicly available at <https://dtcenter.org/community-code/hurricane-wrf-hwrf/download>. The HWRF-B code repository is located at <https://svn-dtc-hwrf.cgd.ucar.edu/branches/HB20> and can be shared with interested parties upon request along with all information required to replicate the simulations. Graphical products associated with TC forecasts described in this text can be found online at <https://storm.aoml.noaa.gov>.

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Figures

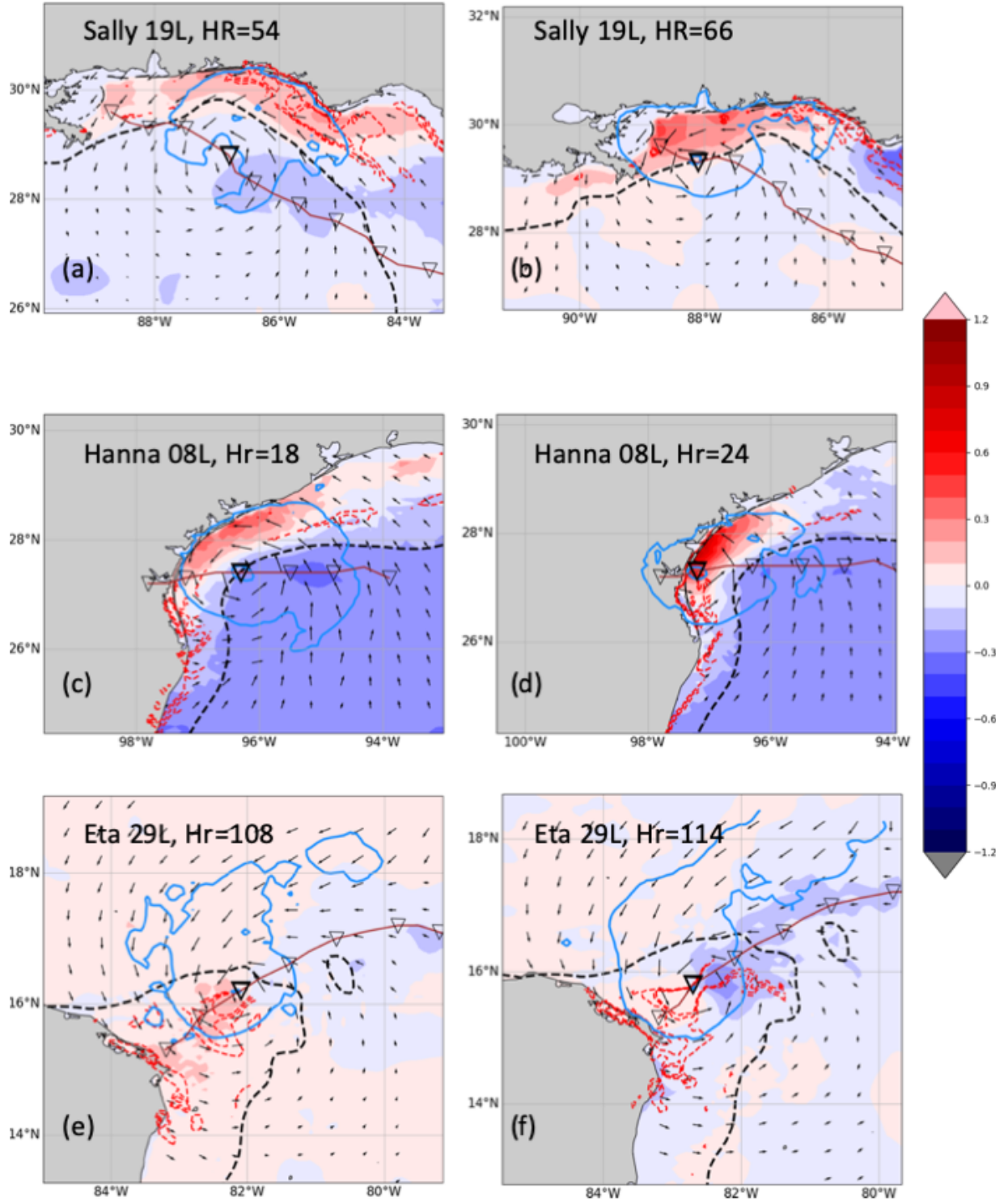


Figure 1: Ocean model fields for TCs (a,b) Sally, (c,d) Hanna, and (e,f) Eta showing changes in sea-surface elevation (m/day, shading), snapshots of instantaneous surface-current convergence (s^{-1} , dashed red contours), and $>17.5 \text{ ms}^{-1}$ ($>34 \text{ kt}$) surface-wind fields (blue contours). Storm forecast tracks are in brown, triangle markers every 6 h. Left column shows a forecast hour prior to intensification: (a) hour 54, (c) hour 18, (e) hour 108. Right column shows the forecast hour immediately after intensification: (b) hour 66, (d) hour 24, (f) hour 114.

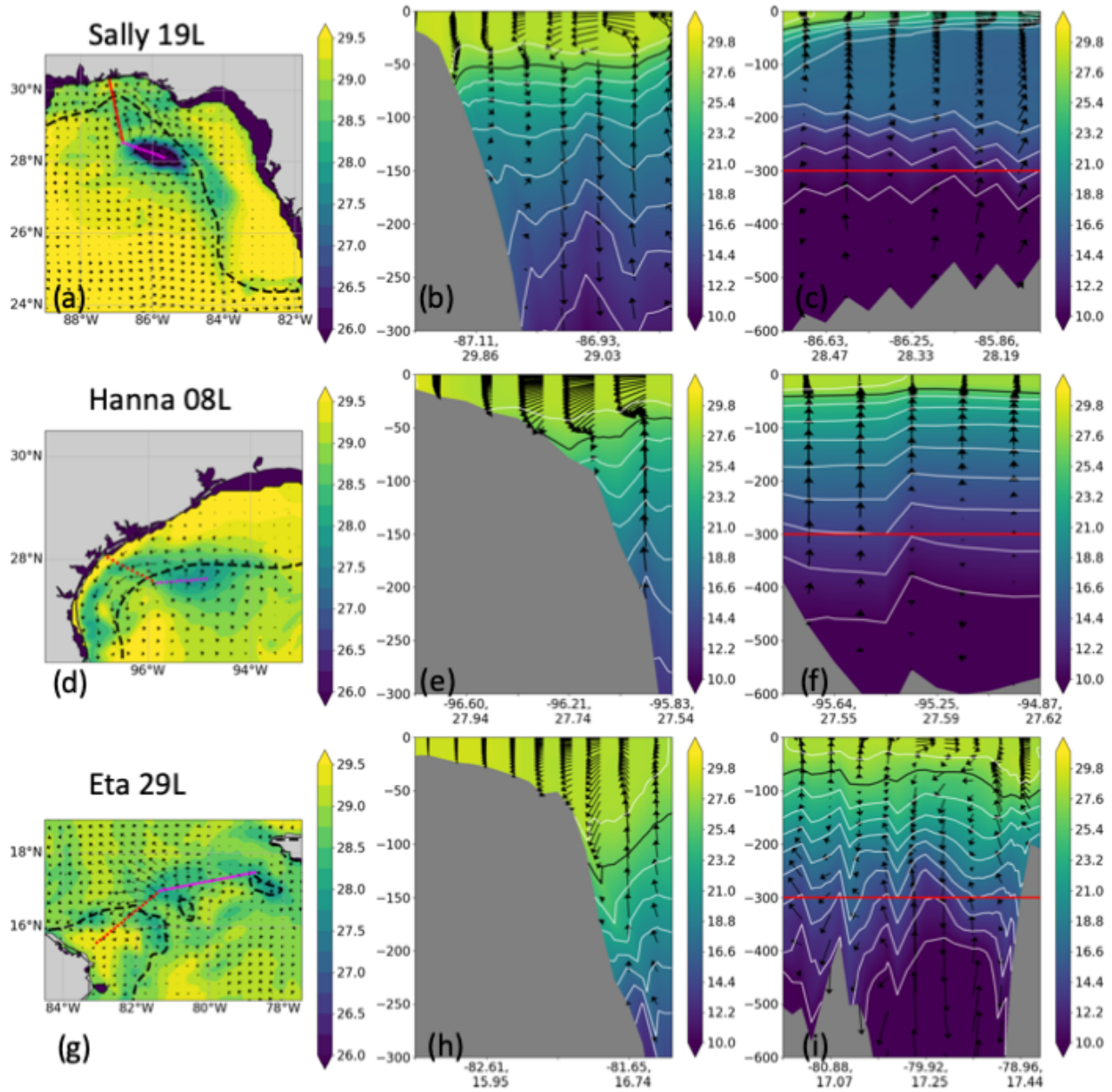


Figure 2: Ocean temperature and currents prior to intensification for: (a-c) Sally, (d-f) Hanna, and (g-i) Eta. Left panels (a,d,g) show sea surface temperature (SST, shading); black dashed contours show 150 m isobaths and black arrows show instantaneous ocean surface currents. Red lines show sections profiled in the middle column; magenta lines show sections profiled in the right column. Middle panels (b,e,h) show cross-sections of sea temperature (shading) and along-track currents (black arrows) over coastal downwelling regions. Right panels (c,f,i) show cross-sections over the upwelling region in each storm's cold-wake (red lines at 300 m highlight cutoff depth of panels in the middle column). White contours in the middle and right columns show sea temperature every 2 K; the contour of the 26 °C isobath is shown in black.

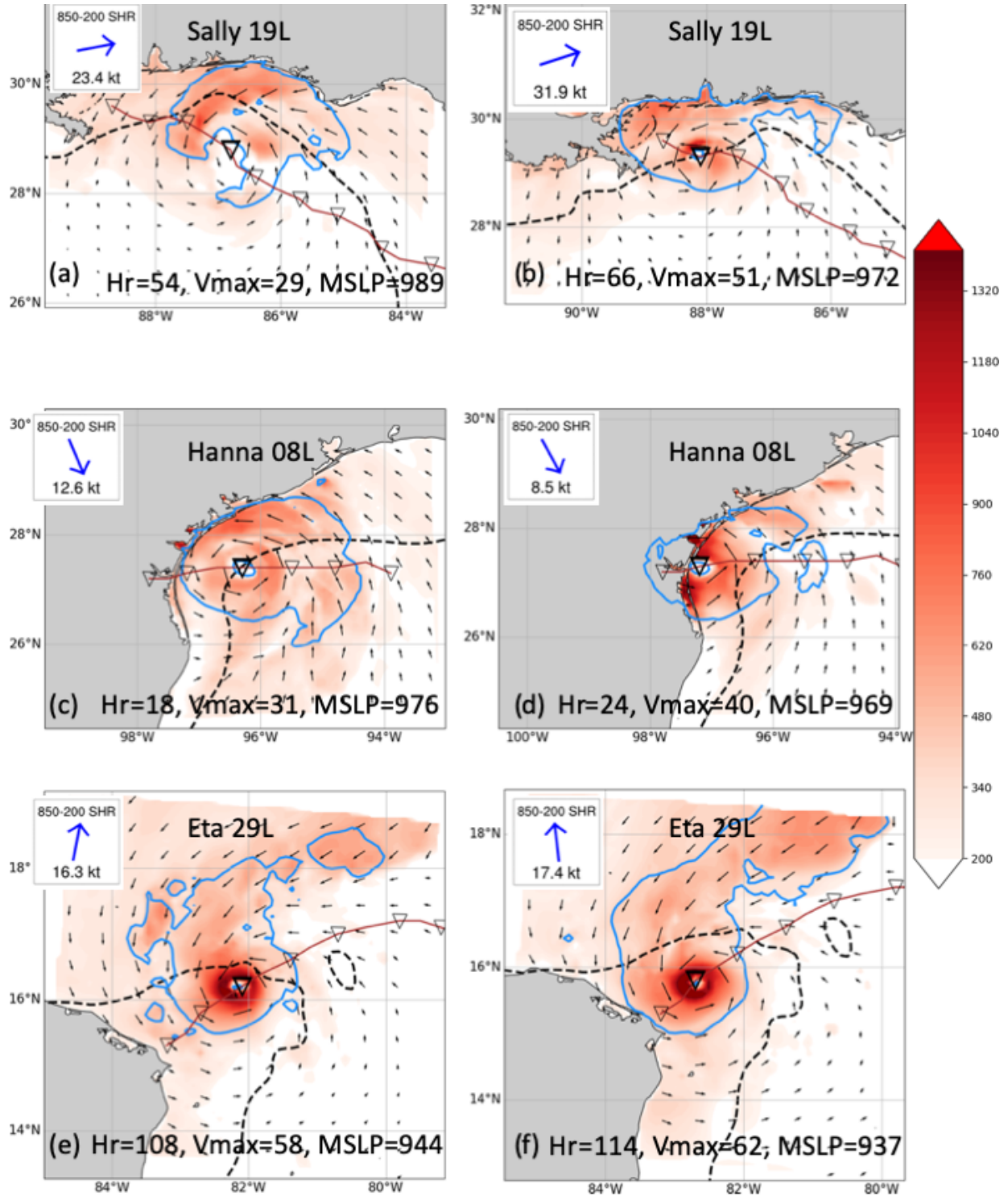


Figure 3: Total air-sea enthalpy fluxes (W/m^2 , shading), with snapshots of instantaneous $>17.5 \text{ ms}^{-1}$ surface wind field (blue contours) and wind direction (black arrows), 150 m isobath (black dashed line), and forecast TC track (brown lines, triangles), for: (a-b) Sally, (c-d) Hanna, and (e-f) Eta. Forecast-hours are as in Figure 1. Insets indicate vertical wind shear (VWS) between 850 and 200 hPa, maximum 10 m wind speed [ms^{-1}] (V_{max}), and minimum sea-level pressure [hPa] (MSLP) at the forecast-hour shown.

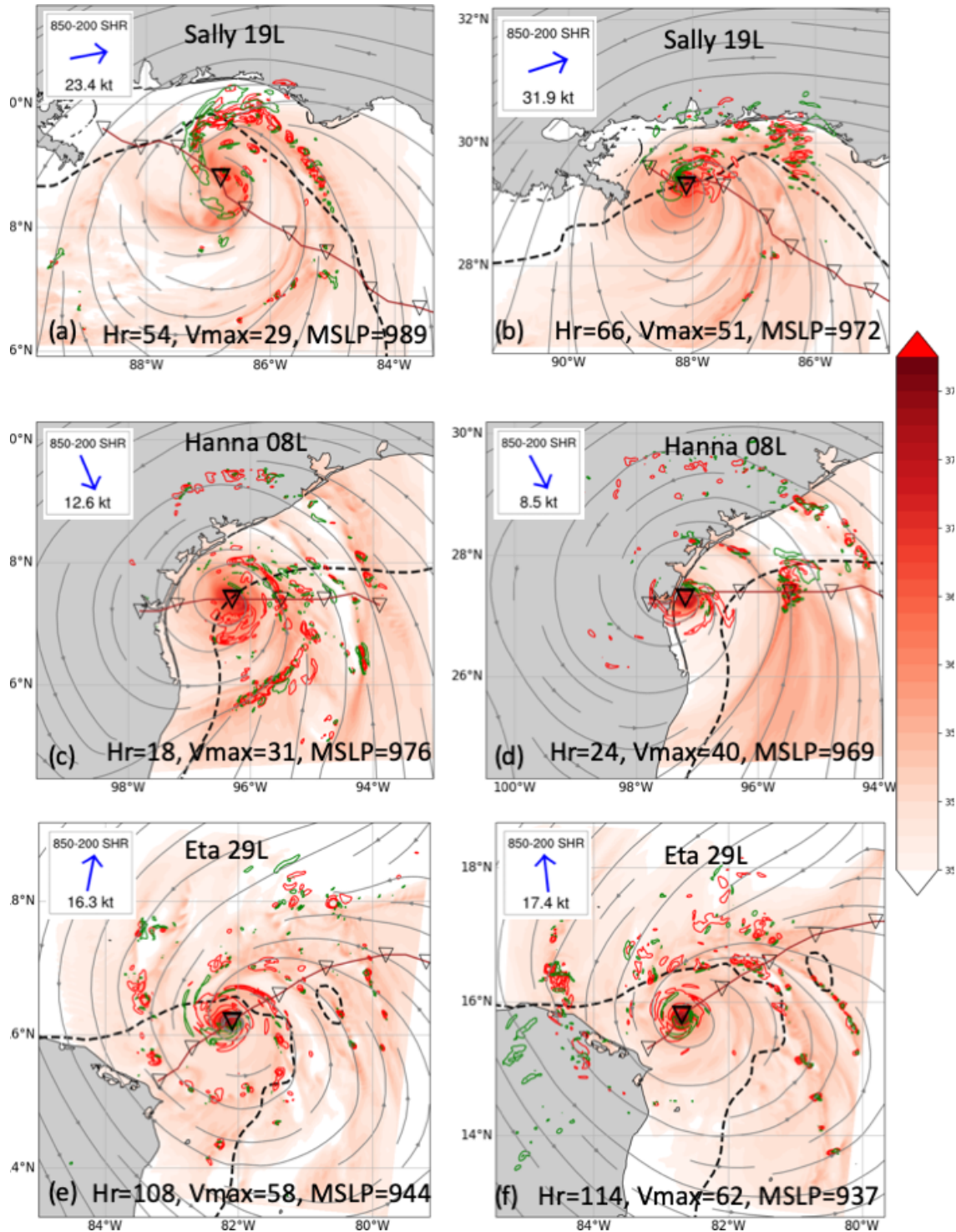


Figure 4: Mean equivalent potential temperature (θ_e , shading), vertical velocity (contours) and mean wind streamlines below 850 mb (gray). Green contours denote downdrafts ($w < -0.75 \text{ ms}^{-1}$ below 600 hPa); red contours denote updrafts ($w > 2.0 \text{ ms}^{-1}$ above 600 hPa). Forecast-hours are as in Figure 1. Insets show VWS, Vmax, and MSLP as in Figure 3.

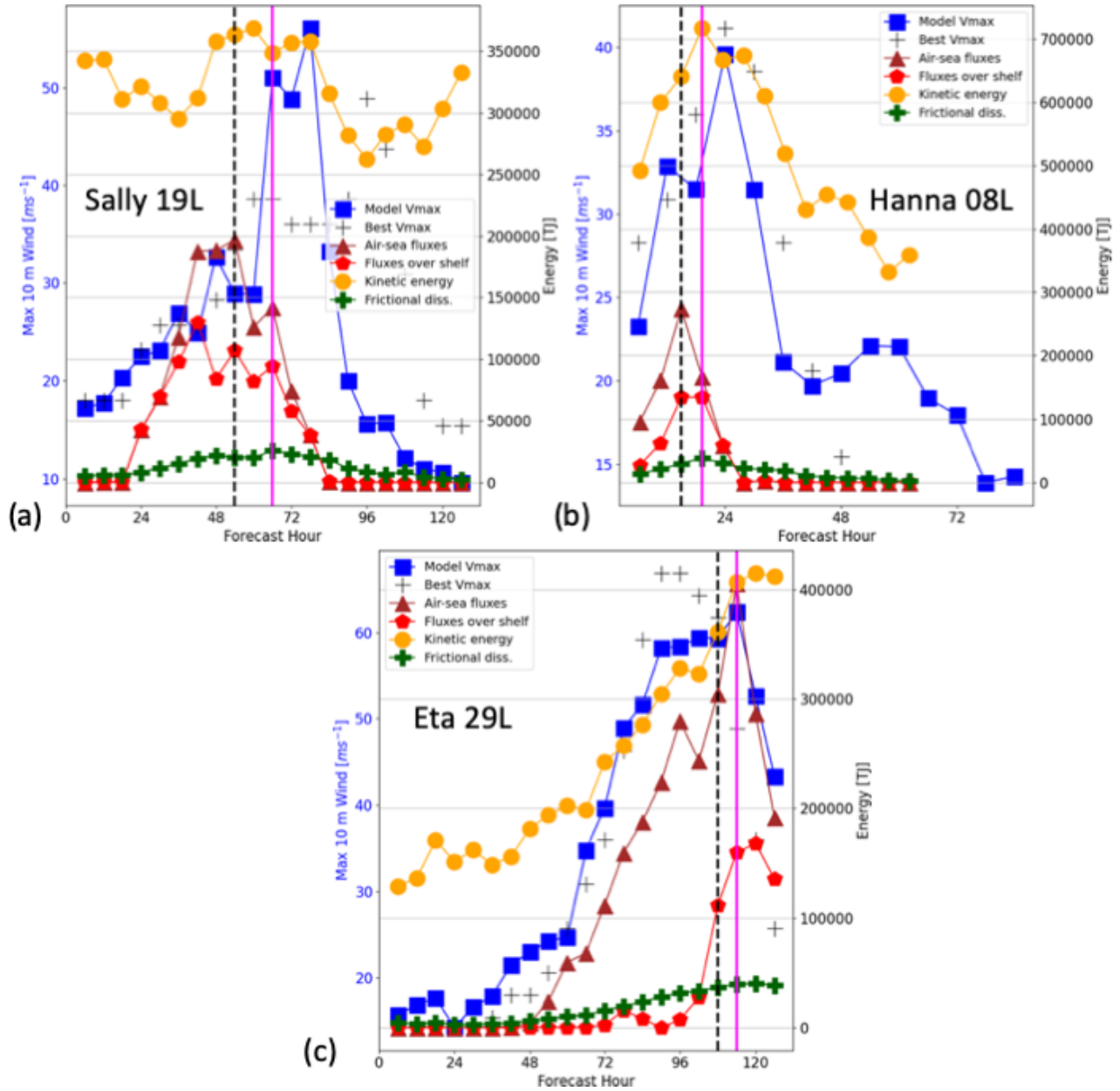


Figure 5: Simplified energy budget terms (from Eq. S1) in TJ (scale in black axis at right of each panel), including: total air-sea enthalpy flux ($THF_a + THF_s$, brown lines, triangles), enthalpy flux over the shelf only (THF_s , red lines, pentagons), frictional dissipation (FD, green lines and green “+”), and total kinetic energy (KE, orange lines, circles). Maximum 10 m wind speed in ms^{-1} is shown in blue (axis at left, blue line, square markers), along with best-track maximum speed (black “+”). Panels show: (a) Sally, (b) Hanna, and (c) Eta. Note differing vertical scales between panels.