

Not My Fault: NOW is the best time to prepare for earthquakes and tsunamis

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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I spent a few days in Southern California last week. I gave a presentation to the Ventura County VOAD (Volunteers Organizations Active in Disasters) and also touched bases with colleagues at the USGS in Pasadena. Before I left Humboldt, I asked my Ventura host if it might not be better to postpone because of the fires. She insisted that their group was still interested in my presentation.

There were two active fires in Ventura County and, as I drove from Los Angeles to Camarillo, the plumes dominated the skyline. I am a habitual procrastinator. I had only finished putting my slides together early that morning and still hadn't decided on the angle I would take in my presentation. While driving, I pondered how to get my audience to think earthquake when we could see and hear the helicopters overhead and the screech of distant sirens.

The idea popped into my head almost as a joke at first. RIGHT NOW IS THE BEST TIME TO PREPARE FOR EARTHQUAKES AND TSUNAMIS. But the more I thought about it, the better it seemed. Yes I know - you are dealing with life-threatening situations right now and there are so many other things on your plate. I agree - fire is your top priority. But there are several really good reasons that other disasters should be rolling around in your heads as well.

First, there is no better time than during activation to observe what is working working and what could be improved. Your minds are fine-tuned right now to optimizing response. This is built into the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS). Everything is written down so it won't be forgotten and, at various stages, assessments are made.

But don't only think about the disaster of the moment, but how other disasters are similar or different. We are good at learning from events that recur frequently and sadly fires now fit that category. Our brains, so good at seeing patterns in a recent past event, can be blind to surprises from a future event that is different, particularly when it is rare and you haven't experienced it before.

Second, accept that you won't ever find the "right" time to prepare for earthquakes. There is no such thing as 'earthquake weather' and you won't get a red flag warning that earthquakes are more likely this week. Deep in your gut you probably think it's not going to happen this afternoon, right? Probably won't happen this week or month either. Just like me, many organizations are good at procrastinating, and it is so easy to find more pressing things do.

It is always a struggle with rare events to keep the attention of individuals or organizations. In the 1990s, the potential shaking and tsunami hazards associated with the Cascadia subduction zone were just surfacing. Our first preparedness survey conducted in 1993 showed that only 16% of people in Humboldt County had heard of the name.

Oregon took the early lead in developing messaging, outreach products, and tsunami hazard assessment about the Cascadia tsunami threat. The 'Entering' and 'Leaving' tsunami zone signs posted on North Coast roads were developed by the Oregon Department of Transportation. I used Oregon's tsunami safety brochure as a template for the first North Coast flyer in 1996. And scientists from Oregon's Department of Geology and Mineral Industries (DOGAMI) were the first to hold community Cascadia workshops.

In 1995, the State went even further, passing the first legislation restricting the location of critical facilities and schools in tsunami zones. George Priest, a colleague and geologist at DOGAMI, hastened to compile tsunami hazard maps of the entire Oregon coast. George would be the first to tell you that his early maps were simplistic and that there were loopholes. The legislation didn't stop coastal development, but did make coastal communities think and work hard to justify the siting of fire stations, schools and other critical facilities and quickly made many aware of the tsunami hazard.

After the 2004, 2010 and 2011 tsunamis, there was a surge in awareness efforts almost everywhere. But the passage of time dulls the impact and more recent tsunamis have been remote and local in impacts. From its initial passage, there were voices, led by developers, in opposition. This summer, the law was repealed. It was another first for Oregon, which now became the first state to revoke enacted tsunami legislation.

The tsunami law isn't the only recent evidence of Oregon backsliding. Two weeks ago, the City of Portland

rescinded their requirement that signs be posted in unreinforced masonry buildings. URM (brick buildings with no steel reinforcement) are vulnerable to collapse in earthquakes. Portland has more of them than any other West Coast City. Signage is only the tiniest of Band-Aids and won't prevent damage. But it is a public reminder of the problem.

Right NOW really is the best time to keep all of us engaged in building communities resilient to all disasters including earthquakes and tsunamis. I can guarantee that once the ground starts shaking, earthquakes will soar to the top of your priority list. But by then, it will be too late.

Note: Oregon State Oceanography professor and HSU alumni Chris Goldfinger gives his take on Oregon's tsunami law repeal at <https://temblor.net/earthquake-insights/oregon-legislature-turns-its-back-on-tsunamis-8966/>

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