

Not My Fault: Here every week should be tsunami awareness week

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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This week is Tsunami Awareness Week – in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For Alaska, the dates are March 25 – 31, and California is March 27 – 31. Hawaii denotes the whole month of April, American Samoa has set the last week in September and Oregon and Washington combine Tsunami Awareness activities with the ShakeOut in October.

There's a reason for this diversity. Alaska's week always includes March 28 to remember the great 1964 earthquake and tsunami. For Hawaii, the worst tsunami disaster was on April Fools Day 1946 and American Samoa was clobbered by a deadly tsunami on September 29, 2009. Oregon and Washington are most concerned about tsunamis generated by the nearby Cascadia subduction zone and they want to emphasize that shaking is the best warning of a near-source tsunami and so the combination with the Drop, Cover, Hold On ShakeOut drill makes sense.

California's North Coast has led the way promoting tsunami awareness in California. In March 2008, before there was a declared tsunami week, we held our first tsunami communications test. It was a big deal – because it used the actual codes as if a real tsunami had occurred. The stakes were high because we needed to make sure that no one misinterpreted the scroll across their TV screen as a real tsunami, causing alarm and perhaps an irrational response.

We worked hard to make sure that everyone knew about the test. There were print articles, PSAs on radio and television and special efforts aimed at non-English speakers and the deaf and hard of hearing communities. Each year, the test expanded – starting with just Humboldt County in 2008, expanding to Del Norte and Mendocino Counties, and adding siren tests and civil air patrol flyovers. Del Norte County developed Tsunami Safety Days, a whole week of activities including a full-scale evacuation drill, and a half-day awareness assembly for all 8th graders in the county.

There are going to be a few changes this year. March can be a rough time of year on the North Coast, and this year particularly so. Our emergency response personnel

are busy with real disasters right now. Weather creates challenges for evacuation drills and outdoor events. School district vacations fall around this time of year, complicating school participation. And our northern neighbors in the Cascadia region don't participate in the March events at all, focusing their tsunami activities in the fall. The Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group and the Humboldt and Del Norte Offices of Emergency Services have agreed for consistency with Oregon and Washington and to move our tsunami test and much of our outreach effort to October.

Just because the test date has moved, doesn't mean you are off the hook. This is an excellent time to review Tsunami Safety 101. Protecting yourself and your family from a tsunami is actually a pretty simple proposition -- stay dry. Fast-moving water is incredibly dangerous. It doesn't matter if you are caught in a flash flood, storm surge, sneaker wave or tsunami. If you are pulled into the water, your odds of survival aren't good. You need to know your zone -- what areas are safe and which ones may be risky. And you need to know that there are two ways to learn a tsunami may be on its way – Mother Nature's warning you with long lasting ground shaking, or an official warning from a tsunami warning center.

Use a tsunami map, like the one in this paper, to locate where you live, work or play. You can also enter an address at <http://myhazards.caloes.ca.gov> to see how close you are to the tsunami zone. If you are in the safe area, stay there. Evacuation always poses some risk, especially in the immediate aftermath of a great earthquake with debris on the street and strong aftershocks likely.

Tsunami signs posted on roads are a visual reminder of areas at risk. Entering and Leaving signs are placed near the boundary between safe areas and the tsunami zone. Try to get at least as far as this point to be in a safe area. If you feel more comfortable going further inland, that is fine. Just plan to do so on foot. Roads could be disrupted from earthquake damage and it doesn't take very many cars to make a monstrous traffic jam. Think of the maps as a tool for you to develop a plan for what works best for you and your family.

We are fortunate that most tsunami zones on the North Coast have high ground close at hand. Practice walking from your home or work place to safe areas. You should have enough time to get to high ground walking at a comfortable pace. And make sure everyone in your family knows the route.

We can provide you or your organization with tsunami brochures, tailored for specific North Coast communities and copies of "Living on Shaky Ground. How to Survive Earthquakes and Tsunamis in Northern California," at no cost. To request copies, please leave a message on the Humboldt Earthquake Education Center message phone (707) 826-6019 and we will be glad to get them to you.

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