

Not My Fault: How we did on the tsunami test

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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Can I grade last Wednesday's Tsunami Communication Test? The jury's still out, but here is a preliminary assessment.

Four factors to consider:

- 1: Did you do what you set out to do – test the systems that you had prioritized?
- 2: Did people understand it was only a test? More important, was anyone injured or overly frightened because they thought it was a real tsunami?
- 3: Was there bad publicity?
- 4: Did you identify problems? Do you have a plan to fix them?

A number of systems were included: emergency notification, emergency Alert (EAS) activation, EAS triggering of sirens, and civil air patrol audible messaging. All of these areas were tested on Wednesday, so check off #1.

It's hard to quantify how many people were confused by the test. There were only a few calls to dispatch in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties asking what was happening, and no reports of anyone who was overly upset or evacuated. I feel comfortable in saying we met the second criteria.

The third sign of a failed test is coverage that reflects poorly on the organizations or personnel involved with the test. Bad publicity can doom future testing and make it impossible to expand into other areas of the state. I judge the media coverage as balanced in both explaining the importance of the test and pointing out problems and I hope they continue to pursue progress in fixing those issues.

And yes, there were problems, some expected and some a surprise. I was pleased to get two emergency notifications at 10 AM on Wednesday. My phone dinged in quick succession with test messages from Humboldt County and HSU and I received emails as well. And from the comments on FaceBook, many others had similar experiences. County reps are following up with Everbridge this coming week to determine exactly how

many messages were delivered. If you didn't get a message, Google or call your County OES office to make sure you are enrolled. I hope all of California incorporates an emergency notification test during next October's Great ShakeOut earthquake drill.

The EAS activation worked. NOAA radios automatically turned on and the message was loud and clear. Other parts of the EAS activation didn't work as well. If you were listening to a local radio station, you would have heard the EAS interruption, but the message was hard to understand on some stations. This has been a problem on every previous test. The EAS message from the County or the Weather Service is digital. Some stations still have analog equipment that receives and retransmits, resulting in distortion. This will continue to be a problem as long as stations don't upgrade equipment.

Local television stations carried the test. No problem with Del Norte County regardless of cable, satellite dish or stream. Suddenlink was a big problem in Humboldt. If you were watching a local station on cable, the broadcast was interrupted at 11 AM and never resumed. County and Weather Service officials made repeated attempts to reach Suddenlink, but were unable to reach anyone with the authority I to lift the test message. Normal broadcasting did not resume until the evening, more than eight hours after it had been interrupted. This is an unacceptable situation and I will keep you posted as to its resolution. The good news is that the problem was identified during a test and not during a real emergency.

EAS should have activated six tsunami sirens in Del Norte and twelve in Humboldt. Only half of the sirens in each county triggered successfully. This was no surprise. Our sirens are old and the damp coastal conditions aren't kind to electronics. During our last test in 2018, there were 15 tsunami sirens in the region and nine were successfully activated via EAS. We've slipped down a notch but the same problem that plagued the sirens then – antiquated electronics – continues to the present. Both counties are looking into fixes.

For many people, sirens are synonymous with successful alerting. It is no longer the case today when there are so many other ways of disseminating information. The sirens on the North Coast have a very specific role in the alerting system. They are targeted to vulnerable areas where people congregate outdoors such as harbors and popular beaches. If you didn't hear a siren on Wednesday, think about where you were and what other methods of notification will reach you.

Two civil air patrol planes made passes over Humboldt and Del Norte Counties broadcasting an audible message. The flyover path is to alert people outside on the beach, in harbors or remote coastal trails. Last Wednesday, I heard from a hiker in Prairie Creek – no cell service, but she did hear the plane announcement loud and clear.

Don't rely on a single way of getting information. There is always a chance that it won't work. The systems tested on Wednesday were only the beginning of the notification process. For a tsunami coming from Chile, Japan or Alaska, there are hours between the initial notification and the arrival of the first tsunami waves. Emergency personnel would be deployed to hazardous areas, knocking on doors and using megaphones in neighborhoods at risk. You would receive information on areas that needed to be evacuated and how get there.

But remember - the greatest tsunami threat is a large earthquake beneath our feet. Don't count on the official notification system working. But Mother Nature will let you know. The ground will shake, and shake, and shake. If you are in a tsunami zone, the earthquake is your signal to evacuate as soon as you can.

One clear lesson from the test – it's great to identify the problems before an emergency.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. The opinions expressed are hers and not the Times-Standard's. All Not My Fault columns are archived online at <https://www2.humboldt.edu/kamome/resources> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu for questions and comments about this column, or to request a free copy of the North Coast preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground." <https://www.times-standard.com/2021/03/28/lori-dengler-how-did-we-do-on-the-tsunami-test/>