

## **Not My Fault: The Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group turns 25**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
Posted August 1, 2021

<https://www.times-standard.com/2021/08/01/lori-dengler-redwood-coast-tsunami-work-group-turns-25/>

This week, the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group (RCTWG) celebrates a silver anniversary. The RCTWG was founded in July 1996 to help prepare agencies with coastal jurisdictions and the public to deal with a tsunami generated by a great earthquake on the Cascadia subduction zone (CSZ).

The first meeting was held at the Redwood National Park Office in Arcata and attended by nine people. I missed the first meeting, but three of the attendees, Vicki Ozaki (Redwood National Park), Linda Nellist (then Humboldt OES coordinator), and Jim Falls (California Geological Survey), are still active members.

We were the “Interagency Tsunami Education Task Group” at that first meeting and Vicki Ozaki was the instigator. Vicki, a hydrologist with the National Park, was concerned about how the Park could plan outreach and emergency response to our new awareness of the near-source tsunami threat.

The 1992 Cape Mendocino earthquake was a sea change in tsunami awareness, not only locally, but nationwide (Not My Fault 4/12/2017). The M7.2 was a mini version of what we think a Cascadia earthquake will be like – very strong ground shaking, sea floor and coast deformation and a tsunami that arrives at nearby locations only minutes to tens of minutes later.

The earthquake spurred State and federal agencies to study impacts of a larger Cascadia earthquake. The report, published in 1995, outlined the double whammy of an earthquake and tsunami together. We had experienced many strong local earthquakes and protocols were in place for tsunamis coming from far away when there was time to issue warnings. But an earthquake quickly followed by tsunami surges was new ground in 1995.

We were lucky that the 1992 earthquake struck a rural part of California with no big federal or university research centers. The Cascadia earthquake/tsunami problem had been dropped squarely in our laps and it was up to us to

deal with it; we couldn’t rely on the USGS or a State Agency to solve the problem. We had local expertise with geologists at HSU and personnel from local federal/state/county agencies and organizations. But we also had something much more important – personal investment. We all lived here, and a great Cascadia earthquake/tsunami would profoundly affect each and every one of us.

From the first meeting in 1996, we made sure the table was large. We soon had representatives from the Eureka NWS, Red Cross, Cal Trans, State Parks, Tribes and Rancherias. We were ad hoc in the truest definition of the term – formed for the specific task of building resilience to the Cascadia earthquake and tsunami threat within the three North Coast counties most affected.

The RCTWG never had a formal charter or official structure. Everyone has an equal voice. Most of the effort is volunteer and we have no budget or salaries. Grants and contracts are funneled through RCTWG member organizations – the RCTWG serves a coordinating function to make sure that all efforts in the region are consistent.

For the first eight years, the RCTWG functioned with little outside interest. We were tied into nascent national efforts at the same time. The National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program (NTHMP) also began in 1996, and I served on the NTHMP steering committee in those early days as well. We benefitted from knowing what others in the Cascadia region were doing. After the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, we gained international attention for grass roots efforts.

I am amazed that the RCTWG has survived and grown stronger. We have tallied up an impressive number of products – seven editions of the Living on Shaky Ground publication, coordinating at least seven community evacuation drills, developing and staffing 26 county fair displays, 25 community tsunami brochures, preparedness triad magnets in 13 languages, and have been part of at least 75 community meetings and countless workshops. RCTWG members have participated in eight post-earthquake/tsunami field investigations and have presented papers at national and international meetings. Eight North Coast communities/entities have now achieved national TsunamiReady recognition.

Two significant tsunamis and a damaging North Coast earthquake occurred in the last 25 years and RCTWG helped in communication both during and after those events. And the partnerships developed through the RCTWG have helped in non-geologic events as well

including flooding, winter storms, sneaker waves and wildland fires. Perhaps the most telling example of the group's value is that at least a dozen RCTWG members, long retired from the position that first linked them to the group, continue to actively participate. I like to remind people that once an RCTWG member, always an RCTWG member.

Twenty-five years deserved a party and that was our plan. Ryan Aylward, at the Eureka NWS, came up with a motto – "Party like it's 1996." We reserved a space, ordered a cake, and people were coming from far away. For the last two weeks I have been collecting photographs and documents and compiling a PowerPoint presentation.

Sadly, it isn't 1996. As the delta variant emerged and COVID cases climbed, a niggling doubt arose. Many of our members have young children at home and even though we are all vaccinated, there is now worrisome data that vaccinated people can transmit the virus. The RCTWG developed a phrase about a decade ago that has become my mantra, "when in doubt, drill it out." If you aren't sure, treat the threat as real. It was time to follow our own advice and postpone the celebration.

It was such a hard call – the momentum was surging towards our party and the potential threat was small. Small but still real and if anyone from the party had exposed a child or other vulnerable family member, that was not acceptable. But 25 years in the RCTWG has helped me learn that lesson. It may be months or even years before we can really party like it's 1996 again, but I am sure the RCTWG will still be going strong and worthy of a celebration.

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