

Times Standard

Not My Fault: The steps to community resilience

Lori Dengler for the Times-Standard

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Members of the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group from Humboldt and Del Norte counties inaugurated the new Yurok Emergency Operations Center in Klamath on Tuesday.

Last Tuesday I attended a meeting of the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group (RCTWG). Founded in July of 1996, the RCTWG is a mostly voluntary group of representatives from the three North Coast California counties. Members have a broad mix of backgrounds, from emergency management professionals in government and tribal agencies to academics, educational institutions, and volunteer groups. We are united in our common interest to reduce impacts from future earthquakes and tsunamis. We meet bi-monthly and last week's meeting was at the new Yurok Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Klamath.

Since the pandemic, most of our meetings have been teleconferenced and it was nice to talk in person. It was even nicer to see Amos Pole, the Yurok Emergency Manager and inaugurate the brand-new EOC. The term EOC meant nothing to me when I first became involved in hazards research. My focus was to better understand shaking strength and earthquake sources. This is useful information for emergency response planning, but I was clueless as to how it might be used by people in the emergency management field.

That changed in 1999 when I got the approval to teach a natural hazards class at Humboldt. The class had a lab, and I partnered with the Geography Department to use their new GIS facility. I barely knew more than the students when it came to ARC/INFO and plotting earthquake,

volcanoe, and other data and I likely learned the most from the class. To add some out of the lab experience I turned to Tom Dewey who was the campus Chief of Police at the time.

Tom gave me my first exposure to the structure and practice of emergency management. It is a field rife with acronyms – EOC is only the beginning. There’s ICS (Incident Command System), OES (Office of Emergency Services), and SEMS (Standardized Emergency Management) and a host of others. See the “alphabet soup “ link below for a more complete list.

Tom had recently overseen the installation of a new campus EOC and was eager to try it out. He developed an exercise for my class. Students would take on the roles of emergency management personnel and “respond” to a scenario earthquake. Tom and his staff would call in events such as “smoke seen coming out of the chemistry building” and the student in the operations section would have to decide how to route the information.

It was a very exciting two-hour exercise that gave me and the class a taste of what responding to a real disaster might be like. Noisy and chaotic-appearing at first glance, it was impressive how quickly students fell into their roles – scribes frantically writing down all of the incoming situation reports, logistics personnel requesting heavy equipment to remove debris, and the planning section giving updates on the location of critical campus infrastructure.

That class exercise gave me a deep appreciation of SEMS and how a group of amateurs like my students could function in a coordinated way within a well-structured system. SEMS was developed in California after the disastrous Oakland Hills Fire of 1991. Many fire departments from around the Bay Area responded but were unable to provide adequate mutual aid because of non-standardized equipment (couldn’t attach hoses to fire hydrants) and the inability to communicate across multiple jurisdictions.

The 1991 fire killed 25 people and destroyed more the 3000 homes and apartment units. One of the people who lost their home was State Senator Nicholas Petris who in the aftermath led the legislature in mandating adoption of standardized procedures to respond to fires and other disasters. The California SEMS system quickly became a model for other states and in 2003 after the terrorist attacks of 2001, a modified version called NIMS (National Incident Management System) was required nation-wide for any jurisdiction hoping to receive federal aid post disaster.

The three principles of SEMS and NIMS are a unified command system, ICS where every position has a well-defined duty and chain of command, and interagency coordination through mutual aid. The heart of the response is the EOC. For smaller incidents such as a localized fire, the EOC may be nothing more than a single fire engine and the management team just the fire crew. For major disasters, there will be many EOCs with staffs of a dozen or more trained personnel in each one. One of the beauties of SEMS is that it can expand or contract to meet the scale of the event.

For a major earthquake, storm or flood, each affected city, county, and state will have an EOC. Tribes and special districts like Cal Poly Humboldt also have EOCs. Coordinating all of these separate pieces at the regional level is the Operational Area (OA). In California, OAs are the counties. It’s the job of the counties to convey information to the SOC (State Operations Center).

Inaugurating an EOC is exciting for us emergency workers. The Yurok tribe's new facility is in the Yurok Community Center, the newest tribal building in Klamath. EOCs are odd ducks in terms of use. There needs to be space for dozens of people, computers and communication equipment during a significant event. But disasters may be years apart and during the in-between times, EOCs may appear to be unused spaces. But when a disaster like an earthquake strikes with no lead time, an EOC needs to be immediately functional.

The Yurok tribe has partly solved this conundrum by putting the EOC in a multi-use space. The new Community Center features what is arguably the nicest gym and basketball court in Del Norte County. In normal times, the space can host community festivals and when emergency strikes, be quickly converted to an evacuation site housing 300 people and the communications hub around the corner. With a commercial kitchen and generator system, it might be one of the most comfortable evacuation shelters on the North Coast.

Please don't let my focus on the governmental disaster response apparatus lull you into thinking that individuals and non-governmental entities need not be concerned on preparedness and the immediate aftermath of a major earthquake/flood/tsunami/wildfire. In the first hours, days, and sometimes weeks, you might be on your own. Efforts your community has made to reduce hazards beforehand and have robust lines of communication among the different societal pieces will make a big difference in how quickly you will recover.

Now is the time to find out what your neighborhood and community is doing to prepare. Start with your home. Our Living On Shaky Ground magazine can help you identify earthquake hazards and go about fixing them. Visit <https://humboldt.gov/3407/Wildfire-Hazard> for wildfire safety tips and <https://humboldt.gov/633/Water-Safety-Program> for water hazards.

Several upcoming events can connect you to community resources. November 16 1-4 PM Ready Eureka is hosting a free introduction to Emergency Preparedness at 3030 L ST., Eureka – no charge but you must pre-enroll at 707-441-4000. November 23 11 AM – 3 PM CUNA is hosting a Disaster Preparedness Block Party 4700 Valley East Blvd, Arcata. December 7 10 AM – noon, Master Food Preservers of Humboldt and Del Norte Counties is hosting an emergency food preparation class at the UCCE Agricultural Building 5360 S Broadway, Eureka – register at <https://surveys.ucanr.edu/survey.cfm?surveynumber=44026>

Alphabet Soup emergency acronyms is posted at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/resources> under Additional Resources for Teachers.

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://kamome.humboldt.edu/taxonomy/term/5> 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 copies of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground."