

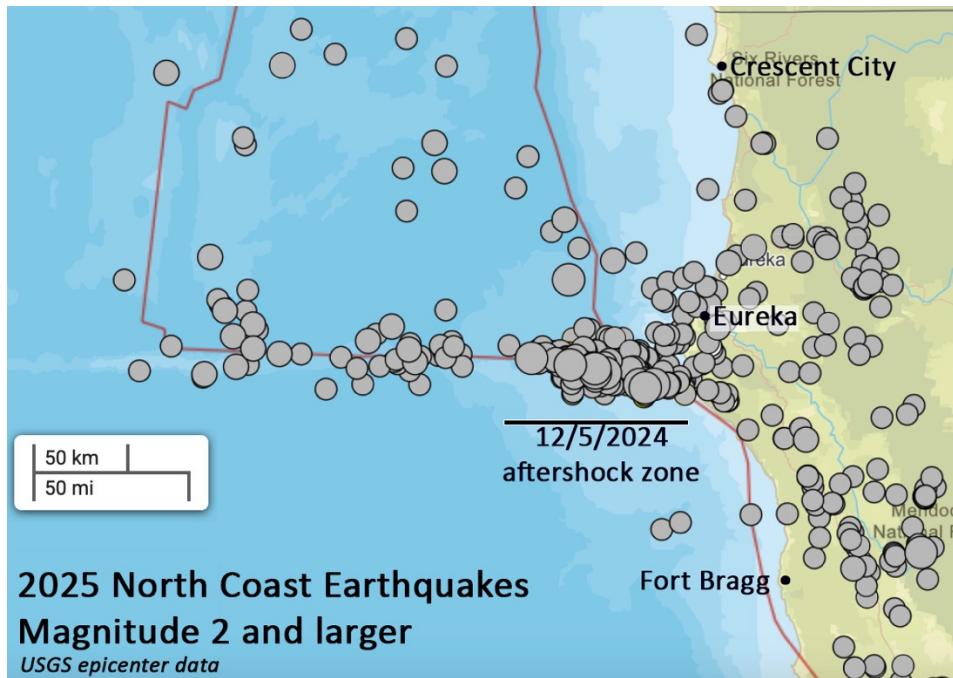
Times Standard

Not My Fault: A major fire and the 2025 North Coast Earthquake Story in Brief

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This map shows North Coast earthquakes of magnitude 2 and larger in 2025. Most of the earthquakes were on the Mendocino fault just offshore of Cape Mendocino and are considered aftershocks of the December 2024 M7.0 Mendocino fault earthquake. (USGS data).

The best news about earthquakes in 2025 is that the North Coast topped no lists. Only ten quakes in our area made it into the M4 range and they were only mildly felt. Before I jump into the shaky details of 2025, I can't pass a mention of this week's Arcata fire. No earthquake to blame but the size, suddenness, and response all have seismic connections.

On Friday afternoon January 2, an Arcata Fire response team was returning from a call when they noticed smoke in the vicinity of the old Seely and Titlow building on H and 10th St. Fire teams from all over the county quickly responded but the winds were nasty, quickly enflaming the whole block of structures from the Hensel's parking lot to H and south to the alley next to Northtown Books. The bulldozed structures followed by vacant lots will be an ugly reminder for months or maybe years.

For anyone who spends time in Arcata, the damage is heart wrenching. I have artist friends who lost their studio spaces, a lifetime of work, and all their art supplies. I was a regular at Hensel's paint and housewares store. Northtown Books was my favorite business in Arcata,

where we launched our book about the little boat Kamome that drifted to Crescent City after the 2011 Japan tsunami. We have no degree of separation from the losses.

It will likely be some time before the cause of the blaze can be determined. It is a reminder that even on a wet winter day, coastal Humboldt County has a fire risk. This corner of Arcata is no newcomer to fires. This was the fifth major fire in this area since 1979. The combination of older wood buildings with high use creates vulnerability that can be exacerbated by wind and earthquakes.

One of those fires had an earthquake trigger. On New Year's eve 1994 flames destroyed the historic Feuerwerker building on 10th St. At first there seemed to be no obvious cause to the fire. All of the shops were closed and there was no one in the building at the time. Careful investigation identified the culprit a few weeks later. An old gas line had been jiggled by the December 26, M5.4 earthquake just offshore of Eureka. Gas had been slowly seeping between the walls of the old building and five days later, enough had accumulated to combust.

The January 2nd fire was a tragedy and anyone who lived, worked, or frequented the area will be touched by it for some time. But the response was as fast as it could have been, and no people were injured or killed. Imagine how it may have unfolded in the aftermath of a major earthquake. Earthquakes often cause multiple fires. In the Cape Mendocino earthquakes of 1992, Petrolia lost their fire station and Scotia, the shopping center to blazes.

Earthquake planning should always include fire safety. On the North Coast, our dependence on wood heat poses an additional vulnerability. The Cape Mendocino earthquake caused over 70% of the wood stoves in Petrolia and half in Ferndale to topple over or pull away from the stove pipe. Fortunately, it was a warm April day, and few were in use at the time. Having charged fire extinguishers and knowing how to use them are essential life-saving skills.

It took nearly every fire-fighting asset in Humboldt County to respond to Arcata's fire. What if there had been two or more fires of this size at the same time? What if the roads had been blocked by ground failure and earthquake debris? It might take hours or days before trained responders might reach you. During these critical first minutes and hours, response will be in the hands of local community members. Your community actions will be far more effective if you've established a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) beforehand. Knowing how to organize, what to do and not to do can make a huge difference in life safety. Learn more about Humboldt CERT programs at <https://www.humboldtcert.com>.

How did you find out about the fire and what did you do if you were nearby? I don't live in Arcata, and it was a Facebook post that alerted me. My son lives three blocks from the fire, and the acrid smell of smoke was his heads up. Arcata's Code Red emergency notification system was triggered and people who were signed up received a notice at 3:37 PM, roughly an hour after the fire started, advising people to shelter in place unless ordered to evacuate. Like the county system, you must SIGN UP IN ADVANCE. From the response of my friends, only a few of you seem to have taken that step. Just go to <https://www.cityofarcata.org/685/CodeRED>. This fire was limited to Arcata, and the County notification system was not activated. Cal Poly Humboldt did send out a notification several hours after the fire began that no campus facilities were at risk, but power had been briefly disrupted.

If you were anywhere the area affected, follow instructions of emergency personnel. People reluctant to leave and those flocking to the area just complicate the ability of our limited responders to do their job. If you aren't in the immediate area, the best thing you can do is follow events remotely. The postings on Redheaded Blackbelt and Lost Coast Outpost were far more informative than anything I would have learned had I been on the scene.

The January 2nd fire was far more damaging than any North Coast seismic event of 2025. The year was one of the quietest local earthquake years. There have only been two other years since 2000 when this area produced no magnitude 5 or larger earthquakes. Our biggest 2025 quake was a 4.6 on January 17th. That earthquake occurred only five weeks after the December 2024 M7.0 Mendocino fault quake and we were still in the thick of the aftershock sequence. Aftershocks continued through much of 2025 accounting for the majority of our M≥2 earthquakes of the year, but none were large enough to cause more than a passing notice. By the end of the year, we were still getting a few small earthquakes a month that can arguably be called aftershocks, but we are essentially back to normal background levels now.

One other earthquake of 2025 is worth a short mention. A 4.5 occurred in the southern Gorda plate on July 29, 46 miles west of Ferndale. It was reported felt lightly from Ferndale to Trinidad. It sticks in my memory because it occurred only six minutes before the largest quake of the last 14 years, the M8.8 Kamchatka earthquake. No, our 4.5 wasn't a foreshock and the timing was purely coincidental, but I was looking at a seismogram of our local event when I saw the much larger signals from Kamchatka begin to arrive.

The Kamchatka earthquake was centered nearly 3500 miles away from our coast yet caused far more damage and disruption than any of our 2025 local earthquakes. Tsunami messages began arriving only minutes after the quake and over the course of the next two days we would go from statement to advisory to warning to advisory before cancellation. Humboldt and Del Norte counties would be placed in a tsunami warning status for the second time in seven months and few of the problems that surfaced during the December 2024 warning had been addressed.

When the water finally stilled, a dock in Crescent City's harbor had suffered a million dollars of damage, but fortunately no damage to the commercial fleet or injuries. The harbor's boat evacuation plan went well. What didn't go well was confusion from tourists and residents alike when the Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) announced the warning and still contained the "you are in danger" wording although almost no one actually was. I hope for improvements in 2026.

More on 2025's other earthquakes of note next week. Here's hoping that the January 2 Arcata fire remains the worst North Coast disaster story of 2025 and the 2025 seismic quiescence continues.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Cal Poly Humboldt, and 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."