

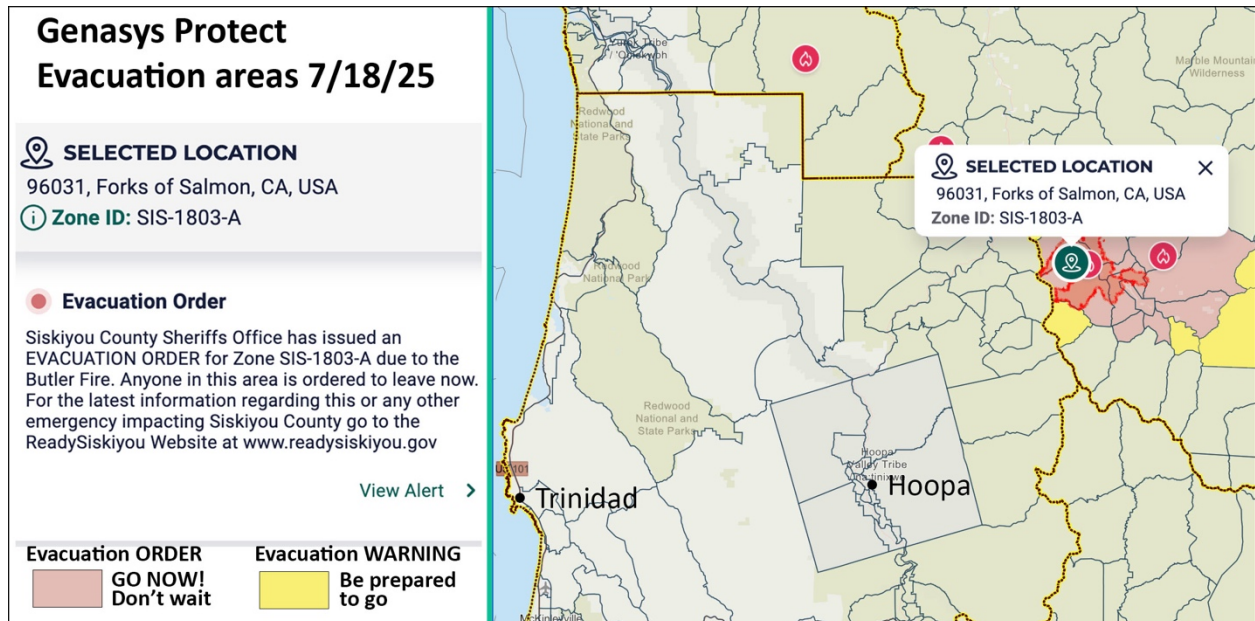
Times Standard

Not My Fault: Not My Fault: Another evacuation failure leads to tragedy in Texas

Lori Dengler for the Times-Standard

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<https://www.times-standard.com/2025/07/19/lori-dengler-when-minutes-matter-vacations-should-include-hazard-awareness/>



Screenshot of the Genasys Protect app of the Butler fire and surrounding area for July 18. The area is divided into zones: evacuation orders are currently in place for red zones, evacuation warnings for zones in yellow. Clicking on the zone near Forks of Salmon brings up this alert information.

In the past week, evacuations have been ordered for at least some part of nearly every state in the country. Most common at this time of year is fire with at least 15 evacuation orders in place, including the Butler Fire (Orleans Complex) in nearby Siskiyou County. There were four flood alerts on my list and a variety of other evacuation triggers including a gas leak in Ukiah and a tsunami in Alaska. Hawaii has restricted access to Volcanoes National Park several times during the current eruptive sequence at Kilauea.

Fires, floods, eruptions, tsunamis, and human-caused hazards can all quickly surge to the dangerous level and require you to act quickly to stay out of harm's way. Your ability to get accurate information in a timely manner and take the appropriate action are vital to the safety of you and your family.

Most of you have some idea of how to get an alert if you are home or at work. December 5th was a good example of how Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) function. Like many of you, I received two alerts that Thursday morning: a ShakeAlert to expect ground shaking and a tsunami warning four minutes later. The notification part of the system worked well; I'll elaborate on some of the failures later.

WEA functions by knowing your cell phone location. If you are in the defined alert area and you have cell coverage and location access open on your phone, you should receive a notification. The alerts are brief, only 90 characters for legacy phones and 360 for newer models. Check out <https://www.weather.gov/wrn/wea360> for examples on what WEA messages will look like.

WEA alerts and the Emergency Alert System (EAS) broadcasts on radio, television, and over NOAA radio, only work if you can be reached. In April 2020, about three weeks into the pandemic, I was standing at the cash register line at Eureka Natural Foods and the couple behind me looked bewildered. They had a month's worth of food and supplies in their cart and asked me what was going on. Why were there so few people and why were we all masked?

This twosome lived off the grid in eastern Humboldt and came to town once a month for supplies. They knew nothing about Covid, the outbreak, and the measures in place to control it. Groups living in such isolation aren't the only ones hard to contact. People who don't listen to or read local media and have little community interaction can also be out of reach.

Don't assume WEA will reach you. All California counties and most areas of the country have established regional alerting networks. These systems, often referred to as Reverse 911, will send texts, emails, or call landlines to numbers/addresses that you specify. Opt into these systems by signing up online or phoning your county Office of Emergency Services.

All parts of the Western U.S. are in fire country and a sure way to get evacuation alerts pushed to your phone is through the Genasys Protect App. You can input in your home, work, school or other address and if an evacuation Order or Warning is in place, the App will push the notification to you. What's the difference between an Order and a Warning? Terminology is confusing and fire alerts are different than weather or tsunamis. In the fire world, Warning means "keep informed and prepare to evacuate," while an evacuation Order means "Go Now!" My own take is to be conservative and get myself out of the area once a Warning is in place.

Fire evacuation Orders and Warnings are issued by zones. There are more than 300 zones in Humboldt, all denoted by a three-letter prefix of the city or county and a number. I live in HUM-E042. Make a note of your zone and include it in your personal and family emergency plans. The zone name may be the only information you get by radio or television. These zones are primarily used for wildfire but may be used for other purposes.

It's much harder to get hazard information when you are traveling or vacationing. Unfamiliar terrain means you aren't as likely to be aware of regional threats like flash floods that aren't frequent where you live. You may be in areas where cell phone coverage is spotty or non-existent. And if you are like me, you could be in vacation mode which means I'm having fun, no news is good news, and I am totally offline.

Over 2,300 visitors died in Thailand and Sri Lanka on December 26, 2004 during the Indian Ocean tsunami. Sweden, Germany, and France top the list with over 500 casualties apiece. Thirty-three Americans died, including a man from McKinleyville. I call it 'vacationer amnesia' and it contributed to the high death toll in the 2010 Chile tsunami as well. One of the few people who stayed alert in 2004 was ten-year-old Tilly Smith who studied tsunamis in her geography class. She noticed unusual waves on a Thailand beach, spread an alarm, and saved

100 people. More about Tilly Smith and other tsunami heroes and heroines at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/sites/default/files/tsunami%20heroines%20and%20heroes.pdf>

Camping, hiking, and backpacking in remote areas pose greater problems for getting timely hazard information. You can reduce your risk by pre-trip planning. Check out weather forecasts and see if any red flag warnings are in place. Going on a coastal fishing or kayak trip? It's easy to go to tsunami.gov and see if there are any alerts in place. Let family/friends/neighbors know where you are going, your route, and when you plan to return. Sign in with rangers if heading into the backcountry so if danger develops, they know where you are. Situational awareness is always important – developing thunderheads or smoke plumes can give you a heads up. There are a variety of satellite-aided communication devices available and if you have a newer cell phone, its SOS feature may already allow you to make emergency calls.

The most sophisticated alerting network is of little use if you don't know what to do or respond inappropriately. On December 5, almost all of us received the tsunami Warning on our phones and radios but many took the wrong action. Granted the text message was confusing. Most people who received the "You are in danger" message were outside of the tsunami zone for our worst-case tsunami and had no need to evacuate. Knowing your zone beforehand would help. Too many people got in their cars, creating a massive traffic jam that tied everyone up, including many on 101 between Arcata and Eureka, one of the worst place to be in a real tsunami.

Whether at home, work, or on vacation, there are a number of common evacuation mistakes that can increase your risk.

- Relying on your past experience. We all use our own histories to project what is likely to happen in the future. Many of the people caught in the recent Guadeloupe River flood had visited the area for decades. Flash floods are not uncommon and at least six events have caused deaths in the past fifty years. But many people were surprised that the July 4th flood was bigger and developed more quickly.
- The normalcy bias. When something happens that we haven't experienced before, our brains go blank, and our initial response is denial. It takes time to comprehend what is happening and we want official confirmation and guidance on what to do. Disasters can disrupt infrastructure and make such guidance impossible.
- False alert syndrome. Repeated notifications for events that didn't cause damage can numb you into not responding to the real ones. There is always uncertainty in forecasting hazards. Weigh the alternatives – the small inconvenience of evacuating when the event turned out to be small compared to the enormous consequence of not evacuating if the event is big.
- Delayed response. The longer it takes you to respond, the more likely you are to be hurt. Studies of the 2011 Japan tsunami showed that delaying evacuation by as little as five minutes increased the likelihood of death. Media reports (Washington Post 7/14/25) Camp Mystic waited more than 45 minutes after receiving a flood alert before beginning evacuations.

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."