

## **Not My Fault: Having that evacuation conversation again**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
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<https://www.times-standard.com/2021/09/05/lori-dengler-having-that-evacuation-conversation-again/?utm>

Sadly, it's the time of year of quickly changing hazard conditions, rapid decision making and (sometimes chaotic) evacuations, whether in the west for escaping wildfires and Gulf and East Coast for folks dealing with hurricanes.

According to Cal Fire, a total of 7,003 fires have, or are burning consuming over 3000 square miles of forest and woodlands in 2021. Nearly 3000 buildings have been destroyed, and seven firefighters and two civilians injured. Cal Fire estimates the acreage burned to date is about three times larger than last year.

The 2021 fire season has hit close to home. Not only with the smoky skies and degraded air conditions, but crippling transportation routes, and with last Sunday's Knob fire near Willow Creek, forcing evacuations. All of you probably know someone who was forced to evacuate and some of you have been directly impacted.

Why cover this ground yet again? Evacuating is one of the most difficult things for people to do. If I can convince a handful of you to think about what would trigger you to leave home and prepare in advance, it's a worthwhile endeavor.

There are many reasons why evacuation is hard. Home is our safe place and our emotional center. Homes may be our largest financial asset and it is reasonable to be concerned about the threat of robbery if we leave. Some people living in the wildland-urban interface may think that they can save their property if they stay. In the Knob fire, some of these folks hampered firefighting efforts by blocking roads and pumping water

<https://kymkemp.com/2021/09/01/humboldt-county-sheriffs-department-warns-residents-that-community-groups-arent-authorized-to-fight-fire/>.

Researchers who study evacuation say the biggest hurdle is how we perceive risk. In a poll of more than a thousand people six weeks after Hurricane Katrina, 57% of people who didn't evacuate said they didn't believe it would be as bad as it turned out to be

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/09/05/why-do-some-people-refuse-evacuate-during-hurricane-same-reasons-people-dont-listen-warnings-they-should-save/>. By the time they recognized the severity of the situation, it was too late to leave.

Humans are notoriously ill-equipped to make rapid decisions about something they have never experienced before. Our brains are hard-wired to scenarios we have built from previous experience. When confronted with something completely new, our first response is denial. The Japanese call this the normalcy bias – we assume that nothing unusual is happening. A study by Japanese scientists after the 2011 earthquake showed it took people in the tsunami zone on average 20 minutes before they began evacuation. Most people just didn't think it would be as bad as it was.

Amanda Ripley wrote a book "The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes" about the normalcy bias and how the delay in making evacuation decisions could cost you your life. The book well researched, based on recent social science studies, and takes a positive approach. I made the first chapter on 9/11 and the twin towers mandatory reading when I taught Natural Disasters and I recommend you get a copy.

The crux of "The Unthinkable" is how to go from denial to taking action in the shortest amount of time. Talking in your workplace and at home, developing plans and practicing drills are the tools to do this. With events like wildland fire and hurricanes, there is usually time to become aware of the building threat. Red Flag warnings for fire weather and NWS weather alerts are heads up that problems could be on the way. But one of the things we've learned this year is that past models for how quickly these threats materialize and their likely magnitude may be off as we move into the era of substantial climate change.

The 2006 Hurricane Katrina study identified a second factor in failure to evacuate. Many people didn't know how to do so, lacked the means to evacuate or didn't have a safe place to evacuate to. Calling for mandatory evacuations without consideration of the difficulties this poses for a substantial portion of the population is unconscionable.

Resilience is a way of describing a society's efforts to reduce losses from disaster. A resilient community is one less likely to be impacted by an event and more likely to bounce back quickly. I think of resilience as having four parts – preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation (actions to reduce risk). These parts overlap and cycle continuously from one to the other. Resilience means

including recovery planning as part of preparedness and recovery must include mitigation and promoting preparedness before the next event arrives.

For disasters like fire, tsunamis and hurricanes, evacuation is an essential part of a resilient community and all four of these parts are part of the planning process. It is not just a government exercise – all parts of the community including business, recreation, education, and the general public must be part of the process. Without your involvement, it's a meaningless exercise.

Here are two easy ways to get started. First, learn about your hazards. Anyone in California can get a quick assessment of earthquake, tsunami, fire, and flood hazards at <https://myhazards.caloes.ca.gov>. Just enter your address into the site and look at the maps and summary text. My house is in an area of high seismic hazard (strong ground shaking) but I am outside of the flood, tsunami and fire hazard zone.

The second step is signing up for emergency notifications. Notification isn't automatic – you have to sign up with your county in order to get texts, phone calls or email messages alerting you that something may be amiss. I am hoping that all three counties will include a test of the notification system next month during the annual ShakeOut earthquake drill.

Bottom line: don't wait for the last minute to evacuate. It may feel inconvenient to leave and learn nothing happened, but not nearly as inconvenient as if you stayed and were directly impacted.

Note: Emergency alert signups: Humboldt County, (707) 268-2500 or <https://humboldt.gov/2014/Emergency-Notifications>, Del Norte County, (707) 464-7213/<https://preparedelnorte.com/resources/Everbridge>, In Mendocino County, <https://member.everbridge.net/index/892807736722865#/signup>

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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/resources> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email [rctwg@humboldt.edu](mailto:rctwg@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."