

Not My Fault: Tsunami Test called off, ShakeOut still on

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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This is the second time I've written this week's column. I was pleased that I finished a summary of next week's Tsunami Week activities, the Tsunami Test and ShakeOut, ahead of time. Not so fast says Mother Nature. The National Weather Service and the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group (RCTWG) have decided now is not the time for the Tsunami Test.

Let me explain. The Tsunami Test exercises our ability to notify the public when the tsunami comes from far away – like Alaska or Chile or Japan- and there are hours to plan for a coordinated evacuation. The first tsunami communications test was in March 2008. It was a big deal – because it used the actual codes as if a real tsunami had occurred and activated the full Emergency Alert System. The stakes were high because we needed to make sure that no one misinterpreted the scroll across their TV screen as a real tsunami, causing alarm and perhaps an irrational response.

We worked hard to make sure that everyone was aware of the test with special efforts directed towards hearing impaired and non-English speakers. Each year, the test grew. The 2008 test only included Humboldt County, the next years expanding to Del Norte and Mendocino Counties, and adding siren tests, civil air patrol flyovers and reverse calling. We held the test every year except 2011, when a real tsunami from Japan arrived a week beforehand and upstaged any reason to have a test.

The RCTWG thought long and hard about changing the test to October. The weather in March can be rough and emergency response personnel may be busy with real disasters. Weather creates challenges for evacuation drills and outdoor events. Many schools are on spring vacation, complicating school participation. And Oregon and Washington, our Cascadia neighbors, have always incorporated tsunamis into ShakeOut in October. It seemed like a good move.

Except Mother Nature always bats last and this October has been anything but disaster-free. The Northern California fires have compromised our communications, stretched resources thin and sent many of our first responders into the field to cope with what may be the

worst fire season in the State's history. A real disaster always takes precedence over a test.

This is a tense time. It has been difficult to get good information and many of us worry about friends and relatives. The fires are still blazing and the weather conditions that promoted them continue in much of the region. The success of the Tsunami Test is based on education – making sure that everyone understands it is only a test. Those outreach efforts were severely hampered this year and there was a real concern in this year's climate that some people might think that sirens sounding, planes flying overhead and the EAS system going off meant another real disaster was about to hit.

The Tsunami Test was only one part of Tsunami Week activities. The Great ShakeOut will still happen on Thursday October 19th and, like millions of Californians, I will be practicing DROP, COVER and HOLD ON. Unlike the Tsunami Test, ShakeOut focuses on the opposite end of the earthquake-tsunami spectrum, the one beneath our feet. You need to know how to protect yourself from shaking damage and be aware that the earthquake vibrations are likely the only tsunami warning you will receive.

When a major earthquake occurs nearby, you will feel the earthquake shaking and the shaking provides Mother Nature's Natural Warning that large waves could be arriving to a nearby coast in as little as ten minutes. The tsunami warning system will likely be compromised by shaking damage and any official notification will arrive later than the shaking you will feel.

The Great California ShakeOut can help you prepare for this strong earthquake and nearby tsunami. Set your phone alarm to 10:19 or listen to KHSU FM 90.5, who is broadcasting the drill. DROP down to the ground and COVER your head and neck with your arm. If there is a study table or desk nearby, slide beneath it and HOLD on the legs to keep yourself underneath. Get into the habit of counting how long the shaking lasts. If you live or work in a tsunami zone, a count of 30 or longer is your signal to move inland or to higher ground as soon as the shaking eases enough so that you can safely walk. Practice evacuating on the 19th – the more you practice the more likely you will be to do the right thing when a real tsunami could be on its way.

Want more information about tsunamis far and near? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 and we will be glad to send you a free copy of Living on Shaky Ground. How

to Survive Earthquakes and Tsunamis in Northern California.

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