

Not My Fault: Tsunami week(s) and a casualty of the Government Shutdown

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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There is a reason California recognizes tsunami hazards in March. California's two worst tsunamis of the past century were both in this month. The March 28, 1964 tsunami was the worst, killing 13 (11 on the North Coast), destroying 29 blocks of Crescent City and causing impacts as far away as Los Angeles. In second place, the Japan tsunami a little over eight years ago wiped out the Crescent City Harbor, swept a young man out to sea at the mouth of the Klamath and caused significant harbor damage as far south as Santa Cruz.

There is nothing about March that makes it any more likely to have big earthquakes (the perquisite for major tsunamis) than any other month. The last Cascadia tsunami occurred during January (of 1700) and it was just coincidence that 1964 and 2011 found themselves a few days shy of 47 years apart. But March is a good month to focus attention on tsunamis and hope that some of that outreach helps to make every Californian a little safer no matter what time of year the next tsunami arrives.

Humboldt County has designated next week as Tsunami Preparedness Week and the rest of the State has scheduled tsunami awareness activities for the following week. Humboldt will be conducting a test of their emergency notification system on Wednesday March 20th and all week will be featuring "Ask a tsunami expert" videos on their Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/HumboldtCountyOES/>. Del Norte County will have a similar emergency notification test on March 27th.

The tests are important to see how quickly notifications will reach you in case of a real emergency. But they won't get to you at all if you are not signed up in advance. Almost every county in California now has an emergency notification service but none of them are automatic. You can sign up on line or by calling (information below); you can opt to get information by phone, cell, text and/or email and register several locations such as home, work, school etc. But you need to take action now to enroll. If you are a resident of Humboldt or Del Norte County and you aren't contacted on March 20th or 27th, you are

either not signed up or there was a problem in the system and you should check it out.

There is one thing that won't be happening this year, our annual tsunami communications test. Normally, I would be writing about siren testing, EAS alerts on television and radio, and civil air patrol flyovers. The North Coast has been conducting these tests using the real emergency communications codes since 2008. No other area of the contiguous 48 states conducts tsunami tests using these real live codes. It's an important thing to do because the real emergency messages take a different route and have different coding than the standard weekly tests you hear on radio or television. If the real codes aren't tested, there is no way to know if they will work when they are really needed.

There is a reason why other parts of California and other coastal states have not joined us in these "live code" tests. The down side is significant. If someone sees the crawler on their TV screen "a tsunami warning has been issued for" and aren't aware that it is only a test, they might be frightened, or worse, frantically try to evacuate and possibly injure themselves. Outreach and education are critical to making the test work and the North Coast has managed to do this successfully in the nine tests we've run.

This year, the National Weather Service was all set to run the test on March 27th. But it takes time to lay the groundwork for a successful test. Outreach is required to make sure that everyone - hearing impaired, non-English language speakers or anyone else who might have difficulty understanding messages - knows what is going on. It requires permitting and coordination with the FCC and state/federal partners. It requires a three-month planning window.

Three months before March 27th was five days into the US government shutdown. The Eureka Forecast Office of the National Weather Service has the responsibility for regional dissemination of tsunami warnings and is the lead agency for coordinating the test. Almost all of the staff at the Eureka office are considered essential employees and were working throughout the shutdown preparing weather forecasts and issuing weather notifications. However, the tsunami test and outreach are not considered essential duties and staff were prohibited from spending any time in the planning and permitting process. By the time the shutdown had ended, there wasn't enough time to jump through the bureaucratic hoops or properly prepare for the test.

So no test, but we do have something special for Tsunami Week. I am very pleased to announce that our Kamome Tsunami Curriculum has finally gone live. Three years ago, the California Seismic Safety Commission gave HSU support to develop activities for grades K – 12 based on the story of Kamome, the small boat that beached in Crescent City after the 2011 tsunami and connected the cities of Rikuzentakata and Crescent City. Check out the Resource and Activity links at Kamome@humboldt.edu. Teachers, contact us about free classroom sets of “The Extraordinary Voyage of Kamome. A Tsunami Boat Comes Home.

Note: To sign up for emergency notifications In Humboldt County, call (707) 268-2500 or go to humboldt.gov/alerts. In Del Norte County, (707) 464-7213/
<https://preparedelnorte.com/resources/Everbridge>.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine “Living on Shaky Ground”? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu