

Not My Fault: Three things to know about the tsunami test

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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Next Wednesday, Del Norte, Humboldt, and Mendocino Counties will test their ability to disseminate tsunami warnings. There are three things to know about this test:

- The Emergency Alert System (EAS) will be activated
- The test is for tsunamis that take hours to reach our coast, not the potentially larger tsunamis from nearby
- You don't need to do anything.

Tests of the Emergency Alert System happen all the time, so what's different about this test and why is it important? The National Tsunami Warning Center in Alaska analyzes the tsunami threat posed by earthquakes anywhere in the Pacific. If they deem a tsunami is possible and could affect our coast, an EAS alert is issued. The weekly "test" messages you hear on radio or TV use test codes and don't use all of the real alert system. The only way to make sure the warning messages will work when we really need them is to test the real "live" messages. Testing how alerts reach us is an essential part of preparing for distant-source tsunamis.

Humboldt County took the first brave step to do "live code" testing back in 2008, joined by Del Norte the next year and Mendocino in 2010. When the Japan tsunami occurred in 2011, we learned the value of the previous years' testing. When the sirens went off in the early morning hours of March 11, most people were aware of what they were. Officials were able to evacuate threatened areas in an organized way. It wasn't perfect and we learned from the experience, but it went far better than the response in other areas of the state.

North Coast counties have led the way with testing because we recognize that our tsunami threat is real. The great 1964 Alaska and 2011 Japan earthquakes sent their largest tsunami surges towards nearby coasts – the Kodiak Island and Prince William Sound region in 1964 and the Tohoku coast of Japan seven years ago. But these earthquakes were so large and deformed such a large area of the sea floor that the wave energy sent outwards and away from the source region was still large enough to wreak havoc on the North Coast.

Residents in the source areas of Alaska and Japan felt their respective earthquakes. The shaking lasted more

than two minutes and no one could have slept through them. The shaking was a loud and clear Natural Warning, and if people took immediate heed and evacuated, most had time to get to safety. Other areas of the Pacific, including Northern California, were too far away to feel the shaking. This is where the tsunami warning system comes into play.

In emergency management, systems must be tested repeatedly to make sure they work as intended. Systems and personnel are always changing and new residents have made the North Coast their home. And there is something new this year – for the first time Del Norte and Humboldt Counties will exercise their emergency mass notification system as part of the test. You have to sign up in advance to receive these notifications. In Del Norte, signup online at <http://preparedelnorte.com/resources/Everbridge>, or call (707) 464-7213. In Humboldt, go to <http://humboldt.gov/alerts> or call (707) 268-2500.

What will happen next Wednesday? If you are watching television around 11:00 a.m. on March 28, expect to see a crawler indicating that a tsunami warning has been issued, and hear a voice before and after indicating that it is only a test. If you are listening to the radio, you will hear alert tones followed by a voice announcing that the test is occurring. Note – streaming services, disc TV or satellite radio stations broadcasting from outside of our area will not carry the test. NOAA weather radios with the Public Alert feature will automatically turn on and announce the same message as on radios. In some coastal areas of Humboldt or Del Norte County, you might hear an announcement from an airplane (subject to weather conditions), or a siren being tested.

There is nothing to be concerned about if you don't hear all of these different messages. The warning system is designed to be redundant and I hope everyone gets at least one notification. Your job? Relax. Feedback is always appreciated and you can report your observations of the drill to the National Weather Service at 707-443-6484.

If you work for a North Coast business or other organization, use the test as an opportunity to talk about your procedures when a Tsunami Warning is issued. How will your staff communicate with one another and will you consider closing or sending employees home. Please talk about tsunamis with your family, friends, and co-workers. And always remember, the next North Coast tsunami might not come from far away. Feeling an earthquake that lasts a long time is an even more important warning

than anything you hear through official channels. If you are living, working or playing in a tsunami zone, this is your cue to immediately head to higher ground or inland away from the coast.

There is one caveat. If a real emergency requiring a county response occurs before the scheduled test, it takes precedent and efforts will be made to let you know that the test has been cancelled.

More about the test at
https://www.wrh.noaa.gov/eka/Poster_Tsunami_Warning_Test_2018.pdf

And just remember – please chill, it’s just a drill!

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<http://www.times-standard.com/opinion/20180321/three-things-to-know-about-the-tsunami-warning-test>