

## **Not My Fault: Spread the word – Wednesday’s Tsunami Test is only a test**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
Posted March 21, 2021

On March 24, Del Norte, Humboldt and Mendocino Counties will conduct a test of the tsunami alert system.

There are three things you need 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

What to expect around 11 AM on Wednesday:

Watching TV? You may see a crawler that a tsunami warning has been issued for the region. A voice over will explain it is only a test. Local stations will carry the test; satellite TV and many cable stations will not. You don’t need to do anything.

Listening to radio? Broadcast will be interrupted by alert tones and a voice will explain this is a test of the tsunami warning system. You don’t need to do anything.

If you have signed up for emergency notifications from your county, you should receive a message via text, email or telephone. You don’t need to do anything.

NOAA Weather Radios will carry the test. If you have a radio with the Public Alert feature, it should automatically turn on. You don’t need to do anything.

In some areas you may hear sirens. Triggering EAS automatically activates coastal sirens. One of the purposes of the test is to see how well this works. Sirens are located in strategic areas near harbors and busy beaches where people congregate outside. You are unlikely to hear a siren further inland or in remote areas. You don’t need to do anything.

If weather conditions permit, you may see a civil air patrol plane fly over your area with loud speakers announcing the test is in progress. The plane could fly over your area anywhere between 11 AM and noon. You don’t need to do anything.

EAS tests happen all the time, so why all the bother about this one? Wednesday’s test is different. The standard

tests are routed via different paths and don’t activate the things that count – cutting into broadcasting, triggering sirens or emergency notification systems. On Wednesday, the NWS Office on Woodley Island will enter the live code into the EAS system as if a REAL TSUNAMI were happening. This is the only way to learn whether these systems will function when a real emergency heads our way.

Humboldt County took the brave step to do “live code” testing back in 2008, joined by Del Norte and Mendocino the following years. 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 knew 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.

The North Coast continued live code tsunami tests every March from 2012 to 2016. In 2017, we decided to switch the test to October during ShakeOut week. The plan was tsunami test on Wednesday followed by the ShakeOut Drop Cover Hold On drill on Thursday. It sounded good on paper but turned out to be a case of “What were we thinking?” There was confusion about how ShakeOut and the tsunami test were related. People were used to the March tests and expected them. March is the month of our two worst tsunami disasters in 1964 and 2011. In the end, we cancelled the 2017 test because of wildfires. The tests are never held during a real emergency when any confusion could arise over whether an alert is real or not.

In 2018, the live code test returned to its familiar slot in March during California’s Tsunami Awareness Week. The 2019 test was in the early planning stage when the government shutdown closed the critical permitting and planning window. And in 2020? Our last face-to-face Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group meeting was on March 4. We were aware of the looming pandemic but it still seemed like a distant threat. We agreed to tentatively move forward with the test.

By the following week, we were in lockdown and it was clear, life, as we had known it, was changed. The tsunami test along with other outreach activities became COVID victims. California followed suit in canceling tsunami week activities and almost emergency planning focus was on the coronavirus.

COVID is more prevalent in our community today than it was one year ago, so why is the tsunami test back on the

schedule? The short answer, COVID is no longer new. After a year of familiarity, it is unlikely that anyone hearing a siren or getting an EAS alert will associate it with the pandemic. And, pandemic or not, we still need to prepare for tsunamis and other disasters.

There is always a caveat. If anything happens before the test that might confuse people as to whether it is real or not, we will cancel. What might trigger cancellation? A widely felt local earthquake, a tsunami alert bulletin from a major distant earthquake, a regional emergency such as a major fire, chemical leak or anything else where sirens are likely to be employed. A real event always takes precedent and efforts will be made to let you know that the test has been cancelled.

The most important thing for you to know about Wednesday's test is that it's only a test. Please don't be alarmed. Please tell everyone you know it's only a test. And remember, you don't need to do anything.

Note: If you really want to do something during tsunami week, contact your County Office of Emergency Services and make sure you are signed up for emergency notifications. Check out the link to the State's new tsunami hazard maps at <https://rctwg.humboldt.edu/home> and find out if you live or work in a tsunami zone.

-----  
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://www2.humboldt.edu/kamome/resources> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email [Kamome@humboldt.edu](mailto:Kamome@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." <https://www.times-standard.com/2021/03/20/lori-dengler-spread-the-word-that-this-wednesdays-tsunami-test-is-only-a-test/>