

Not My Fault: It's a wrap on California Tsunami Preparedness Week 2022

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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There were three goals for this year's tsunami week: a successful community evacuation drill for a tsunami coming from nearby, a successful tsunami communications test for a tsunami coming from far away, and to get all of you thinking about tsunami preparedness.

A week ago, the Manila community held a tsunami evacuation drill. Mother Nature did not cooperate, and the drill coincided with some of the heaviest rain during this drought year. But at least 25 intrepid Manila residents put on their rain gear and headed to high ground as emergency vehicles signaled the start of the drill.

Only 25? That doesn't sound very successful. I disagree. While it might not sound like a lot, those 25 will talk to friends and neighbors and the impact will spread. In 2010, Troy Nicolini (now in charge of the Eureka NWS office) and I were part of a post-tsunami survey team in Chile. We identified factors that exacerbated or reduced impact. Chile has many community and national efforts to improve preparedness. But just like the North Coast, most people don't pay much attention until the event is at hand. One region ran a number of community workshops in the year before the 2010 quake. A study of their effectiveness estimated only five to ten percent of community members had attended. But that small number spread the information and almost everyone had been reached by neighbors talking to neighbors. One interesting outcome of the study – most of the workshop participants were women. And women are very good at spreading the word.

There was a second aim of last week's Manila drill. Multiple agencies and organizations were involved with the planning and conduct of the drill including CHP, Humboldt Sheriff, Arcata and Samoa Fire Departments and County OES. Volunteers from Humboldt CERT and the RCTWG were there as well. Why so many groups? Evacuation drills can pose hazards – especially when roads and highways are involved.

While safety was the first priority, it was also an opportunity to test "interoperability." Coordinating communications and response when multiple agencies respond to an event can be a challenge. There's a reason why California led the nation in developing systems to effectively manage emergencies. The Oakland Hills Fire of 1991 required mutual aid assistance from many regional fire departments. But there was no mechanism for different agencies to communicate or coordinate their response and both homes and lives were lost by the confusion.

We always learn something in drills and exercises. The Manila drill pointed out the need for better evacuation signage in the Manila area and more local participation in drill planning. Some people not in the Manila area were concerned that their communities were not part of the drill and wondered why it wasn't a county wide event. The answer is safety and coordination. It takes a lot of people to safely hold a drill and Humboldt County has the longest coastline of any California county. We hope to hold the next evacuation drill in October and if you want to volunteer your community and help in the planning process, please contact me.

Last Wednesday's Tsunami Communication Test did involve the whole North Coast region. Del Norte, Humboldt, and Mendocino Counties triggered the Emergency Alert System. You may have seen the test on TV and radio broadcasts, received a text, email or phone call from your county emergency notification system, and/or heard a siren or a civil air patrol plane flyover.

It's too early for a complete assessment of how the test went, but here are some early lessons drawn in large part from the nearly 200 people who responded to my feedback query on Facebook.

- The EAS activation worked. NOAA radios automatically turned on and the message was clear. Other parts of the EAS activation didn't work as well. If you were listening to a local radio station, you would have heard the EAS interruption, but the message was hard to understand on some stations. The KHSU broadcast illustrates the problem – the digital alert from EAS gets translated to analog by their aging equipment and then back to digital for broadcast. The result is a garbled report. If you were streaming, there was no problem. We can't force stations to upgrade their equipment but if this happened to your station, please complain and maybe they will listen.

We also had a Suddenlink problem on TV. Like last year, some people found that the EAS activation froze their station and regular programming didn't return. Pushing the

Clear button on your remote should solve the problem, but this shouldn't be happening.

- The Emergency Alert notification systems worked well for most people. There were two issues. First, people complained of no notification and, when queried, said they weren't signed up. Notifications are an opt in system and if you want them, you need to enroll. Search for "emergency notifications your county name" or call your county OES office. You can update your contact information if you are already in the system.

The new problem is robocall blockers and spam identifiers. For some people, the calls showed up with a 'potential spam' message and others had calls completely blocked. I understand the bane of robocalls but trying to sort out how to get emergency calls through when the providers are private companies is a work in progress.

- The Civil Air Patrol planes flew but the foggy conditions required them to fly at 4000 feet – too high for many to clearly hear the broadcast.

We never rely on a single way of notification. There is always a chance that it won't work. The systems tested on Wednesday were only the beginning of the notification process. For a tsunami coming from Chile, Japan or Alaska, there are hours between the initial notification and the arrival of the first tsunami waves. Emergency personnel would be deployed to hazardous areas, knocking on doors, and using megaphones in neighborhoods at risk. You would receive information on areas that needed to be evacuated and how get there.

And what about sirens? They need more space than I have here - read about them next week.

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 for questions and comments about this column, or to request a free copy of the North Coast preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground."