

## **Not My Fault: Grading the tsunami test**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
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The Tsunami Warning Test went off as planned on Wednesday morning. Was it a success? Tests, drills, and exercises are the backbone of emergency management. The most exquisitely written, thoroughly researched, elaborately constructed response plan is absolutely worthless if it isn't frequently tested to make sure the systems work as planned, personnel understand their responsibilities, and the users of the system (that's us), know what to do. If something doesn't work during a test, that doesn't mean the test was not a success.

There are two absolute no no's in emergency testing. The first, someone gets hurt. If someone was not aware that the test was only a test and reacted in such a way to cause harm or extreme anxiety, that's grounds for an F. Many people worked hard to get the message out that yesterday's alerts were only a test. It's still early in the assessment process but as I write this, the test went off well. There were only a handful of 911 calls from people wondering what was going on and we've heard of no reports of injuries caused by hasty reactions. Surveys indicate that more than 90% of the region's population had heard of the test ahead of time. A big thank you goes to Caltrans for making using their electronic signboards to get the message out.

The second sign of a failed test is bad publicity such as media or social media reporting something that reflects poorly on the organizations or personnel involved with the test. Bad publicity can doom future testing and make it impossible to expand into other areas of the state. So far, the reports have been generally positive and our regional media partners have done a good job helping to explain the importance of the test.

A test is a success when it exercises the systems that you are concerned about and you learn what is robust and what systems have problems. Six systems were tested on Wednesday: EAS radio and TV programming interruption, NOAA Weather Radios, mass notification systems, air announcements from civil air patrol, and sirens.

Here are a few preliminary comments. NOAA Weather Radios and EAS system generally worked well, however there were problems with clarity on some radio stations.

This is particularly problematic with stations not designated primary or secondary EAS broadcasters as each station further down the line in the over-the-air relay gets noisier and less intelligible and older analog instrumentation compounds the problem. Normal weekly EAS tests are often originated in station and don't show this problem. The Tsunami Test, using the real "live" alert codes identified this as something to work on.

This was the first time that Del Norte and Humboldt County's emergency notification systems were part of the test. I received my Humboldt County text at 11:00 am and an email one minute later. I also got a message from the HSU emergency notification system. This is a terrific new addition to the communication arsenal. BUT - you have to sign up for notifications in advance in order to receive them. Humboldt County's system is new. If you signed up for the old one three or four years ago, you need to enroll in the new system at <http://humboldt.gov/alerts> or call Humboldt County OES, 707-268-2500.

Weather did permit the civil air patrol planes to fly this year and reports from the limited flyover area are that most people were able to understand the audible message. The planes are a nice addition to the other notification methods, but don't expect to hear them in a real tsunami event where the flyovers would be concentrated in remote beaches and coastal recreation areas where people would not likely receive other messages. And in a real tsunami, the planes would only fly during day time and if weather permits.

The siren report is mixed. Two of the three sirens in Del Norte County worked. Four of the 12 Humboldt sirens have maintenance problems at the moment. Of the remaining eight, three needed to be triggered manually. Two of the four Mendocino sirens worked. The North Coast siren system has always been intended for a specific purpose - to notify people likely to be outside in populated coastal areas like harbors. If you didn't hear a siren today, think about where you were and what other methods of notification might work better for your situation.

Don't rely on a single way of getting information. 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 remember - for our greatest tsunami threat, generated by a very large earthquake beneath our feet, only the natural warning is guaranteed to work. The ground will shake, and shake, and shake. If you are in a tsunami zone, the earthquake is your signal to evacuate as soon as you can.

Your feedback is just as important as the assessment of the technical systems. Report your experiences online at <https://www.facebook.com/NWSEureka/> or call the Eureka NWS Office at (707) 443-6484.

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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](mailto:Kamome@humboldt.edu)

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