

Boats, docks damaged in tsunami surges at Santa Cruz harbor

Cathy Kelly, Santa Cruz Sentinel, 3-11-11

Just after 11 a.m. Santa Cruz police issued mandatory evacuations for the lower harbor dock area. Deputy Police Chief Steve Clark said they are anticipating an 8-foot surge into the harbor based on information received from state emergency services.

Damage at the harbor in Santa Cruz is mounting as boats have broken loose, some sinking, others banging into each other and the docks as at least four tsunami surges have ripped in and out. Officials are expecting to see surges of 3-8 feet again at 5 and 7 p.m. based on models from the state's Office of Emergency Services, Clark said.

Parts of Santa Cruz County were issued an evacuation notice early Friday morning because of the tsunami warning issued about 1:30 a.m. by the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center.

The tsunami warning, sparked by the 8.9 magnitude earthquake in Japan, also prompted the closure of all beaches in the county.

The warning covers coastal areas between Point Concepcion to the Oregon-Washington border and encourages people in low-lying areas to move inland.

Harbor officials said could not immediately say how much damage they have suffered as each surge seems to cause another problem.

Four surges have come into the harbor, the first of which nearly capsized the dredge. At least four boats have floated out to sea as the water recedes.

At least five boats have sunk - the Harbor Patrol boat is partially submerged - and as the surge comes in, it's pushing the boats that are loose into each other. The surges have damaged or destroyed the X and U and the fuel dock. Pieces of the pilings are floating in the water and being sucked out to sea. Many boats are mangled and shoved into each other, looking as though they were thrown about like matchsticks.

About 9:45 a.m. a loose 30-foot sailboat's mast slammed up against the East Cliff bridge's piling and then tipped over.

Jeremy Leonard, who has a boat at the V dock, got the harbor about 8:30 a.m. saw a power boat float out of the harbor channel.

"It's a massive amount of water going out of a narrow channel and it's really jacking things up," Leonard said.

Chad Aleck said he saw a beautiful fishing boat sink.

"It's absolute insanity down here," he said.

Some of the boats that sank or were damaged are house boats and many say the harbor is like a family.

Dan Haifley, executive director of O'Neill Sea Odyssey, said water was being sucked in and out of the harbor at a rapid rate and about 20 minutes later rushed back in. Haifley said it tipped the dredge but it did not capsize.

At 7:45 a.m. when the first wave hit there was a small crowd of people gathered at Lighthouse Point. Surfers were in the water trying to catch some of the waves.

Loren Burke, 23, La Selva Beach, a construction worker from the Westside, was surfing Friday morning said he went surfing with three friends. Burke grew up in the county and doesn't remember ever hearing a tsunami warning before. He said he was excited seeing the ocean this morning, but didn't expect to see a big wave hit.

"The waves were about 7 foot and it was a lot of fun," Burke said after he got out of the water just after 8 a.m.

At Cowell Beach, surfers watched as the tsunami surge sucked water out of the area, sending funky waves back in, something most had never seen before but not causing any immediate damage.

Diana Henderson of the National Weather Service in Monterey said the series of waves could last for several hours and urged people to stay away from the coast. She said they have seen about a 3-foot rise in water levels in some cases and significant amplitude changes at several locations. On Main Beach in Santa Cruz, the ocean retreated significantly before rushing back in.

Henderson said the tsunami waves were acting as they had suspected.

County officials issued evacuation notices via phone calls to about 6,600 people about 6:30 a.m. Friday morning in low-lying areas along the coast as well as along the beaches and lagoons. They are requested evacuation areas, not evacuations and do not include the entire area of Watsonville. Evacuated residents can go to centers set up at Jade Street Park, the Santa Cruz Civic Center, the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds or the Davenport fire station.

Santa Cruz city officials did advise people in the city's tsunami inundation zone to evacuate, according to Clark. The order is an advisory, not mandatory. That includes the Beach Flats area, along West Cliff Drive, the harbor area and along the San Lorenzo River.

Given low tide, officials are not anticipating any major problems but are operating under their emergency plan. Anyone who is in the evacuation warning area would have gotten a reverse emergency call from the city's 911 system, Clark said.

"We are initiating appropriate protocols," Clark said.

Business in the Boardwalk and wharf areas likely will be disrupted because of the road closures until the tsunami warning is rescinded later this morning as only emergency personnel are being allowed inside the area, Clark said.

Road closures are Beach Street at the Municipal Wharf, Riverside Avenue at Third Street, Laurel Street Extension at Third Street and Pacific Avenue at Center Street. In the county, road closures include Thurwachter at Beach Road; Shell Drive at Beach Road; San Andreas at Beach Road to Mar Monte; Opal Cliff Drive; Nelson Road by Lockhart Road; all roads leading to the Esplanade from Beach Drive to Spreckels Drive; East Cliff Drive and all roads leading to the beach area; Davenport Landing Road; Beach Road from Watsonville to Pajaro Dunes and Beach Drive.

Sgt. Dan Campos said residents should stay away from the coastal areas until authorities give the all clear, which may take as long as 10 to 12 hours. For more information, visit www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us.

Gateway School in Santa Cruz will be closed today.

Watsonville City Councilman Bill Neighbors said there were long lines of cars at gas stations in Watsonville. He said people were heading up to Mount Madonna on Highway 152, causing some panic and clogging traffic. People are also driving up to the Summit on Highway 17 causing traffic problems for the CHP.

Neighbors said Pajaro Dunes also had been evacuated.

The West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center listed various locations along the West Coast and estimated times of arrival of a tsunami wave.

The first on the list was Neah Bay, Wash., around 7:18 a.m.

The center also warns that tsunamis can be dangerous for many hours after arrival, and the initial wave is not necessarily the largest.

The first California city on the list is Cape Mendocino at 7:17 a.m.

In Santa Cruz County, the center lists only Davenport with a possible arrival time of 7:39 a.m. and Monterey about 7:44 a.m. A wave of about 3 feet could hit in Santa Cruz and one of about 5 feet in Rio del Mar.

A tsunami warning issued by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii includes Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico and Central and South America and the rest of the Pacific Ocean.

Regardless of the tsunami warning, people were down by the ocean watching for a wave and even a few surfers were in the water. Officials do not recommend anyone be or near the water.