

Coast residents evacuate; boats, dock destroyed at Santa Cruz harbor

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One of the docks and several boats at the Santa Cruz harbor were destroyed today as tsunami waves generated from a powerful earthquake in Japan hit Northern California and prompted the evacuation of hundreds of people from the coast.

At 11:15 a.m., a large surge came through the Santa Cruz harbor and sent dozens of boats, some as big as 40-foot long, turning onto their sides and slamming into other boats that were tied up at nearby slips. Several boats sank and people in the crowd gasped loudly and yelled as the boats' masts hit the water.

There were also reports of significant damage in the harbor in Crescent City, located near the California-Oregon border, where 35 boats were crushed.

The majority of the damage in Santa Cruz has been centralized at one of the docks -- known as the U dock-- which was destroyed in spectacular fashion.

"The dock, it looked like an explosion," said Michael Sack, co-owner of Sanctuary Cruises. "The dock just blew up. It buckled and it splintered."

Sack said a 30-foot boat sank and at least four other boats broke loose. Early in the morning, there were an estimated 40 boats tied up in the U-dock. By 11:15 a.m., there were only three or four.

"They were just floating back and forth in the harbor, slammed into other boats," Sack said, adding his 48-foot whale watching boat was not damaged.

ReNae Ammon of Scotts Valley lost her 31-foot sports fishing boat.

"You forget how powerful the ocean is," Ammon said. "You can really be at its mercy."

Toby Goddard, a member of the city's port commission, said the water like a river surging rather than a big wave. Sack described it in similar fashion.

"It was like a 10 to 15 mile an hour current," Sack said. "It started slow and came up about five feet."

There were at least eight to 10 big surges into the harbor, coming about every 10 minutes.

Some boats broke loose, others tipped over, their masts smashing into other boats. Throughout the harbor there was debris floating everywhere, tires, coolers, chunks of wood.

In Capitola, water surges approached the top of the sea wall but did not breach it, according to a city official.

The National Weather Service issued a tsunami warning for much of California's coast following the massive 8.9-magnitude earthquake that struck off Japan's northeastern coast earlier today.

Not long after the first waves began to hit the Santa Cruz coast about 8 a.m., boats were seen floating out of the harbor. Crescent City Councilman Rich Enea told the Times-Standard 35 boats were crushed and the harbor suffered major damage. At 10 a.m., the coastal community was waiting for larger surges to hit.

Early this morning, the weather service issued a tsunami warning telling people who live along the coastlines to move inland to higher ground. As hundreds of people drove away from the coast near Half Moon Bay and

parked along Highway 92 and Skyline Boulevard in San Mateo County, one fisherman was heading for the waves.

Duncan Maclean got into his boat, the Barbara Faye, and headed out to sea this morning when he heard a tsunami was coming.

"It's the safest place to be in a tsunami," Maclean said. "I have a substantial investment here I have to protect."

A few other fishermen out at Pillar Point Harbor were following his lead this morning.

"There's a big swell that seems to be building, but I don't think it's coming from a tsunami. I think it's coming from a storm," said Maclean, who was about six miles off the Half Moon Bay shore as of 9:05 a.m. "I think it's not going to hit as severely as they predicted."

It was a similar scene along Highway 17 at Summit Road.

The first waves hit the Monterey Harbor at about 7:50 a.m. and were about 2.4 feet higher than what is normally seen, according to Diana Henderson of the weather service. Waves first hit San Francisco at about 8:20 p.m.

Once the first waves arrive, the warning may remain in effect for hours. The waves could peak two to three hours after their initial arrival.

"It's not just one big wave," said Diana Henderson, a forecaster with the weather service. "It's a series of waves which could be dangerous for as much as 10 to 10 hours after the initial wave arrival."

The tsunami warning didn't prevent the usual crop of surfers from taking to the water off Pleasure Point in Santa Cruz. A crowd of six at sunrise at the spot known as The Hook at the base of 41st Avenue had swelled to 20 by 7 a.m.

While a few were playing it safe -- "I'm getting out by 7:30; can't justify it to the wife and kids," said one -- others seemed to be passing it off as a typically overhyped natural event that may or may not even be noticed.

By 7:30 a.m., minutes from the tsunami's expected arrival, the water was still littered with surfers and a half dozen more were perched atop the cliff above, deciding whether to put on their own wetsuits and paddle out. Though an electronic sign next to O'Neill Surf Shop on 41st Avenue flashed "TSUNAMI WARNING," more cars were pressing onward than turning back -- a number of them with surfboards strapped to the roof.

In San Mateo County at the intersection of Highway 92 and Skyline Boulevard, about 1,000 cars were parked along both roadways as residents of Half Moon Bay looked to find higher ground. At 8:30 a.m., the roadway resembled a strip mall parking lot as vehicles jammed into medians, breakdown areas and along the shoulder.

While some people remained in their cars, there were some children playing on a grassy area near the median.

Martin Quijano, 25, of Half Moon Bay, received a phone call from a friend at about 4 a.m. and immediately got into his car and drove toward Skyline Boulevard. At first he was scared but is now anxious to get home.

CHP officer Art Montiel is urging motorists to try and park on Skyline Boulevard.

San Mateo County school districts in Half Moon Bay, Pacifica and the Pescadero area were all closed Friday as officials waited for the tsunami.

Officials in Pacifica set up shelters at Terra Nova and Oceana high schools, but the only people who showed up were looking to get a better view of the waves. Oceana High sits on a hill and overlooks the ocean.

"There's nobody in the shelter except the people running it," Oceana Principal April Holland said. "We had almost nobody show up."

At San Francisco International Airport, all inbound flights from Tokyo are canceled, but all Hawaiian flights are operating normally, airport spokesman Mike McCarron said.

In Northern California, waves could reach as high as 5.3 feet, according to the weather service.

The tide began rising shortly after 7:30 a.m. along beaches in Crescent City, where the tsunami was expected to hit the hardest in California. Officials predicted that waves could reach as high as 7 feet.

In Santa Cruz, access to the beach flats including the Boardwalk and municipal wharf will be closed for the duration of the tsunami warning, according to police. The road closings include: Beach Street at Municipal Wharf, Riverside Avenue at Third Street, Laurel Street Extension at Third Street and Pacific Avenue at Center Street.

Santa Cruz city officials advised about 6,600 people in the city's tsunami inundation zone to evacuate, according to Deputy Police Chief Steve 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.

Officials in San Francisco closed Great Highway, Ocean Beach and other city beaches.

Although emergency officials are reminding residents to avoid the coastlines today, there are plenty of onlookers trying to catch a glimpse of the waves.

As spectators gathered near the Pacifica boardwalk, a couple walking their dog along the sea wall said they weren't frightened by the reports and had no intention of evacuating. They were dubious of news and weather reports.

"They also told us it was going to snow a few weeks ago," said Matt Jetty, 31, of Pacifica.

Mark Johnsson, a geologist from the California Coastal Commission, said onlookers were probably expecting movie-style waves.

"Hollywood made it seem like big, huge crashing waves," Johnsson said. "But it's more just a big, gradual inundation."

Johnsson was out from 8 to 9 a.m. In that hour, he said he had seen two tsunami waves.

One man hopped over the sea wall and onto the beach.

"I wouldn't be walking on that beach right now. No way." Johnsson said.