

Man swept out to sea as California coast weathers tsunami waves

Bill Lindelof and Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee, 3-11-11

The tsunami surges that have visited points along the California coast may have claimed its first victim.

The Coast Guard is searching for a person in the Pacific Ocean near the Klamath River in Del Norte County. A man was swept out to sea by a wave when he and two friends were taking photographs of the incoming tsunami waves.

Two of the men were able to get back to the safety of shore. The Coast Guard is searching with helicopters from Air Station Humboldt Bay.

Earlier, Joey Young, spokesman in the Del Norte County emergency operations center, reported aerial views show some 30 boats damaged in the Crescent City harbor.

"We don't know the extent," he said. "Most of our information is aerial from CHP fly-bys. We can't get into the inundation zone."

"We had a surge at 9:50 a.m. at 8 feet," he said. "We are waiting for reports on that. We've been told it is going to be a full 12-hour event."

Elk Creek through downtown is high, but not spilling into downtown, he said.

About 200 people are in the main shelter at Del Norte High School.

In El Granada, north of Half Moon Bay, ocean water was pulling back 40-50 yards from shore, than a minute later rushing into the rocks.

Harvey Gaylin, 22, said he had never seen anything like that before. Meanwhile, kayakers and surfers were on the water.

Surfers struggled to catch a ride on the fast-moving waves.

"This is something for us in our area, but you can see how devastating a real tsunami would be," Gaylin said.

Brad Alexander of the state Emergency Management Agency operations center said the California coast will experience rising water over a several-hour period today.

"It is just going to look like a really high tide," Alexander said. "At first, it will pull back into the ocean, gathering itself, then you'll see a rise of three to six feet in some areas, based on what we saw (this morning) in Hawaii. It will build over a few hours, steadily swelling, varying by location."

Alexander said the tide will recede over time, but could not say how many hours that will take.

An earthquake with preliminary magnitude 8.9 occurred at 9:46 p.m. Pacific Standard time Thursday near the east coast of of Honshu, Japan. The estimated time of wave arrival of tsunami, a series of waves with dangerous potential that could be spawned by the very large earthquake in Japan, are varied for sites along the west coast of California but the big waves have already wreaked havoc near the temblor's origination.

The West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center gave an estimated time of initial wave arrival at San Francisco at 8:08 a.m. However, the waves were calm on city beaches.

Crescent City, Del Norte County, had the greatest potential for being hard hit in California, Bill Knight of the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center said.

Crescent City is the only reported site of mandatory evacuations. Several other areas along coastal California are under voluntary evacuation.

State officials report some 6,000 people have left low-lying areas around Santa Cruz. Another 200 to 300 are believed to have left oceanside areas in Humboldt County. In San Mateo County, just south of San Francisco, some residents of Pacifica, El Granada, Half Moon Bay and Pescadero have chosen to evacuate. In Santa Barbara, 75 campers have left a beach campground. An estimated 1800 residents are participating in precautionary evacuations along the coast near San Luis Obispo.

Knight said the first wave arrival occurred at 7:25 a.m. at Crescent City and the leading edge was expected to hit Southern California at about 8:48 a.m.

Crescent City's entire downtown has been evacuated along with low-lying coastal areas.

Kareen Kalvin, who lives just outside Crescent City, said her house, two miles from the ocean, is not in danger, but much of downtown has been evacuated, and officials are warning people not to go to the seashore to sight-see.

"They are warning people not to go down to the beach, don't be a looky-loo. We need to get out of that area. We don't know what is going to happen. They are not expecting it to be anything devastating, but it could mess up our harbor."

Emergency warnings are in effect for the Bay area counties of San Francisco, Sonoma, Marin, Napa, San Mateo, Contra Costa, Alameda and Santa Clara.

In Hawaii, residents last night heard sirens alerting warning them of possible tsunami. Some stocked up on some water and food.

Traffic jams were evident for a time in some areas as people fueled up at gas stations.

However, residents of Waikiki were relatively calm, having gone through this before. The tsunami reached Hawaii about 3:30 a.m. with little effect on the islands.

Water rushed onshore in Honolulu, swamping the beach in Waikiki and surging over the break wall in the resort but stopped short of the area's high-rise hotels.

Waves of 6 feet high were recorded in Maui, and 3 feet in Oahu and Kauai. Officials warned that the waves would continue and could become larger, but a scientist at the tsunami warning center said it didn't appear that they would cause major damage in Hawaii, according to the Associated Press.