

Tsunami damages NorCal harbors, one man missing

Marisa Lagos and Henry K. Lee, San Francisco Chronicle, 3-11-11

SAN FRANCISCO -- More than 5,000 miles from where it killed hundreds of people in Japan, a tsunami swept ashore today in Northern California, destroying harbors from Santa Cruz to the Oregon border.

Damage was somewhat minimized because the tsunami hit the West Coast during low tide, but emergency officials are warning that the worst may still come.

The first waves hit Crescent City (Del Norte County) shortly before 8 a.m., inundating harbors with forceful surges of seawater. A sheriff's dispatcher said 35 boats and "most if not all" of the docks in the city's harbor had been destroyed.

Near the mouth of the Klamath River, three friends who had gathered to take photos were swept into the ocean. Two of the men made it back to shore, but the Coast Guard is using helicopters to help search for the third man.

In Santa Cruz, hundreds of residents gathered near the shoreline to watch as water surged in and out of harbors. Large chunks of debris floated in the East Harbor, where several boats had broken free and docks had collapsed. At least one large powerboat had capsized and hit other vessels in West Harbor.

Mark Zevanove stood at the end of a dock next to his parents' 43-foot powerboat shortly before lunchtime.

"These are the biggest surges I have ever seen," he said. "We have surges when there are storms, but we have a big breakwater, so they're nothing like what we have today."

Emergency officials said people should stay clear of local beaches.

"It's not just one wave, it's a series that could last up to 12 hours after the initial arrival," said National Weather Service forecaster Diana Henderson. "It will be a series of inundations."

Kelly Huston, spokesman for the state Office of Emergency Services, agreed, saying, "It's not like it's one surge of water and it's over. People shouldn't say, 'Oh, it's 9:30, so everything's great.' There will be some surges after the first surge."

In the Bay Area, Pacifica's eight schools were closed as a precaution against flooding. The main beach in Pacifica also closed, and two officers were on hand to warn the curious.

Several dozen residents gathered at Pedro Point to check out the threatened tsunami around 8 a.m.

For the most part, they were unimpressed.

"I think I saw a bigger wave yesterday," resident Randy Orloff said.

Surfer Sam Rigling agreed.

"You see something like that, you paddle for it, not run from it," he joked.

At times, the water sucked away from the beach 100 feet or more, uncovering rocks right off the point - something Rigling said had never seen in the 40 years he lived in the area.

In San Francisco, the Police Department closed the upper and lower Great Highway from Point Lobos and 48th Avenue to Lake Merced. The National Park Service closed Ocean Beach, Baker Beach, China Beach and Fort Funston. Aquatic Park was also closed this morning. Two Municipal Railway lines that operate on the Great Highway were rerouted.

BART officials considered suspending morning train service, but ultimately chose not to do so. Vallejo resumed ferry service shortly before 9 a.m. after canceling three ferries and replacing them with a bus bridge to San Francisco.

Regular Vallejo ferry commuters said the buses to the city and nearby BART station are faster than the boats, but many questioned whether the cancellation was an overreaction.

"It seems a bit much," said Donald Stewart of Vallejo. "But I guess no one wants to be the one who didn't do something if something happens." He looked over his shoulder at the water and rolled his eyes.

The last significant tsunami warning in San Francisco came after the 8.8 magnitude quake that hit Chile in February 2010. No damage was sustained. The 8.9 magnitude quake in Japan was followed by aftershocks as big as the 1906 quake that destroyed San Francisco.

State officials are having regular conference calls with county and other state agencies, including the California Highway Patrol and Caltrans, to "try to get them the best information we've got," Huston said.

Six flights between San Francisco International Airport and Japan have been canceled, said SFO spokesman Michael McCarron.