

Tsunami surges continue into afternoon, no damage reported yet

Ventura County Star, 3-11-11

Surges from a tsunami caused by an 8.9-magnitude earthquake in Japan are hitting Ventura County beaches, but so far no damage has been reported.

Shipping operations have been suspended at the Port of Hueneme. Port Hueneme Beach and Pier, Pierpont School in Ventura and part of the Ventura Pier were also closed as a precaution. Port Hueneme police reopened the beach area about 11 a.m.

A tsunami advisory was issued for the Southern California coast after the earthquake and a tsunami slammed the eastern coast of Japan.

Late this morning, water was surging dramatically in and out of the Ventura Harbor, which looked like a rushing river with swirling whirlpools. Boats trying to get back in fought against the current and had trouble docking.

An 18-inch tidal surge was reported by Oxnard Harbor Commissioner Jason Hodge, who was with wharfingers this morning monitoring the situation at the Port of Hueneme.

"Luckily we don't have any large ships at berth today," he said. "We just evacuated our oil-service vessels and tug boats. Then we sent a general alarm to all the employees on both the harbor side and the longshoremen and port services in the harbor to be extra cautious for the next couple of hours."

Port maintenance director Nick Neilson said they've also shut down water lines vulnerable to breaks and closed electricity to a sport fishing and other docks.

"Everything's cleared out and looks good so far," he said.

The tsunami caused dramatic drops and rises in sea level, uncommon currents and swells along many parts of the California Coast, according to the Coast Guard. No injuries or major damage was reported in Southern California. Port Hueneme Beach was reopened about 11 a.m., police said. Surfside Drive was closed to incoming traffic but open to people leaving the area earlier in the morning.

The Ventura Unified School District sent an automated phone message to parents this morning advising it was closing Pierpont School for the day after consulting with police and fire officials. The school sits off Pierpont Boulevard near the beach.

According to the National Weather Service, the waves were expected to reach 2 to 3 feet from Santa Barbara to Long Beach. A maximum surge of 2.9 feet was predicted for the Ventura area, with the unusual wave action continuing for up to 10 hours.

A small group of curious onlookers stood along the Hueneme beach boardwalk this morning.

"Were all curious ... to see if anything is going to happen, I guess," said Dorsey Holland, 38, of Port Hueneme.

A couple watching near their home said they were just curious. "We just moved here, so it would be our first tsunami," said Kelly Dye, 34.

About 9:20 a.m. at the Ventura Promenade, waves slowly surged out. Within a few minutes, there appeared to be an extreme low tide with kelp, sea grass and rocks exposed along the beach. Within 10 minutes, the rocks were covered back up.

Curt Montague of Ventura was surfing when the surge came and said he didn't notice anything. He, like the handful of other surfers, wanted to test the waters. "I just wanted to be part of it," said Montague, 62.

At Anchor's Way Marina at the Ventura Harbor, there was a strong river-like current of water flowing into the harbor. Boats were swaying gently but there appeared to be no damage.

"We are expecting some issues along the Ventura Harbor with strong currents," said Curt Kaplan, a National Weather Service meteorologist.

Kaplan advised people to stay away from the water. Strong currents can suck people farther into the ocean and potentially bring boats to dry land, he said.

There hasn't been any official evacuation of Channel Islands Harbor. Harbormasters are in touch with the National Weather Service and taking precautions.

At 9:57 a.m., Darren Gray used a purple crayon to mark the water level on a pylon in front of his boat at the Ventura Harbor. Eight minutes later, the water had dropped four feet. By 10:45 a.m., the water was inching back up the pylon. Grey said the surge was "kind of weak," however.

"Last year's after the Chilean earthquake was much bigger," Grey said.

City officials were advising people to get off the Ventura Pier for their own safety, although it was not mandatory. The pier was open about 100 feet past the Eric Erickson's restaurant but gated after that.

About 20 people gathered to watch the water, some with cameras. Corey Harner, 32, of Ventura came with a camera. "It's cool to be part of it," he said.

Officials at the Ventura Unified School District began discussions about possibly closing Pierpont School about 5:30 a.m., knowing a decision had to be made well in advance of school starting.

"The fact is, it's a little school on the beach. We just didn't want to take any chances," said Superintendent Trudy Tuttle Arriaga.

The district sent out a recorded phone message to Pierpont families shortly before 7 a.m., letting them know the campus would be closed and its 330 students would be welcome at other elementary schools. The Pierpont bus also ran its usual route, in case families didn't get the message.

No children were waiting at bus stops, but some did show up at the campus, where administrators made sure families were contacted and kids got somewhere safe, Arriaga said. Everyone left the school by 8:15 a.m., prior to when the first waves were expected to arrive.

"I believe we were overly cautious," she said. "That's where we choose to be when it comes to the safety of children and staff members."

There were also tidal surges in the Santa Barbara Harbor, but no damage was reported there as of 10:15 a.m., according to a statement from the Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services. Officials were advising people to avoid Santa Barbara County beaches, as well as nearby low lying areas, for the remainder of the day.

The Ventura County Sheriff's Air Unit this morning flew up and down the coast, looking for signs of reseeded water, but members didn't note anything out of the ordinary except the surge out of the Ventura Harbor, officials said.

Coast Guard vessels and helicopters were patrolling the local coastline, looking for unusual water patterns such as water recession or currents that could be dangerous, said Petty Officer 3rd Class Cory Mendenhall, a spokesman for Coast Guard Sector Los Angeles. The vessels were also on standby in case they were needed for rescues.

No injuries or damage were reported to the Coast Guard in Los Angeles or Ventura counties, but officials were reminding people to stay out of the water and off beaches.

Mendenhall said currents and swells related to the tsunami could be underwater, so they wouldn't necessarily be visible from the surface.

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services, the Ventura County Fire Department and the Channel Islands Harbor Patrol keeping in close other public safety agencies around the state, as well as the National Weather Service and warning centers.

"We're closely monitoring the situation," said Cynthia Elliott, program administrator for the Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services.