

Experts tell South County residents what to do during a tsunami warning

Shanna McCord, Santa Cruz Sentinel, 5-5-11

WATSONVILLE -- Olga Diaz, a Watsonville resident of 20 years, was awakened at 5 a.m. March 11 by a phone call from a friend telling her a tsunami was headed for the coast and it would be best to evacuate immediately.

Panic-stricken, Diaz sprang from bed and was on the verge of packing her bags to join the hundreds of mostly Spanish-speaking Watsonville residents who fled the city. The crush to leave created bumper-to-bumper traffic on the roads leading out of town, after residents heard the news of the quake in Japan that would send devastating surges to the California coast in a matter of hours.

Instead of leaving, Diaz turned on her television and quickly discovered she wasn't in imminent danger.

"Literally, I thought the waves were coming and I panicked," she said. "I almost left. Almost."

Hundreds of South County residents fled the area heading for higher ground after hearing of the tsunami warning. The county issued evacuation orders for those in the low-lying areas early that morning, including some along the coast in South County. Residents reported long lines at gas stations and gridlock on Highway 152 as residents headed for the hills, many having heard misinformation from Spanish language media. More than 85 percent of students in Watsonville schools failed to report to class that day as well.

Wednesday, Diaz was part of a small group of Watsonville residents who attended a community meeting at the Civic Plaza to learn about how tsunamis are made and what to do if another one should surface near the Central Coast.

Diaz said the experience of March 11 motivated her to become more informed on the subject.

The meeting included presentations from officials with California Geological Survey, National Weather Service and California Emergency Management Agency.

Tsunami waves, caused mostly by the sea floor rising up, are long and resemble a flood, sort of like lifting the ocean and letting the water spill onto land.

Danger from a tsunami can last up to 24 hours, such as what happened at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor when tsunami surges tore apart docks and sank boats and caused more than \$28 million in damage. Statewide damages from the March 11 tsunami tallied nearly \$50 million.

Rick Wilson of California Geological Survey and Tom Evans of the National Weather Service told residents there are some simple steps to take next time there's an earthquake or tsunami: get to high ground.

"For the most part safety is only a few blocks inland," Evans said. "Only a few blocks in and up and you're in the safe zone."

Residents were advised to turn on their televisions and radios for warnings and advisories from emergency officials. Evans recommended people purchase a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration radio, which costs about \$35 and remains on stand-by until there is an announcement to make.