

Magnitude 6.5 earthquake rattles Eureka in Northern California

The temblor snaps power lines, shatters windows and is felt over a wide area, but no major injuries are reported. 'It was a monstrous one,' a merchant says.

Ruben Vives and Patrick McDonnell, Los Angeles Times, 1-10-10

A magnitude 6.5 earthquake rocked the Northern California city of Eureka on Saturday, snapping power lines, toppling chimneys, knocking down traffic signals, shattering windows and prompting the evacuation of at least one apartment building.

There were no reports of major injuries, but the temblor, which struck at 4:27 p.m. about 33 miles southwest of the coastal city of 26,000, was powerful enough to send people running into the streets, some fearing a tsunami.

Centered offshore about 13 miles deep, the quake was felt as far north as central Oregon, as far south as Santa Cruz and as far east as Reno, the U.S. Geological Survey said.

"It was a monstrous one," said Phil Burns, owner of Mity Nice Bakery Cafe Restaurant in Eureka, which is about 80 miles south of the Oregon border. "Usually, they're sharp, but this one was very wiggly. It was rolling in all directions."

In the south Eureka fishing village of King Salmon, the 10 seconds of shaking broke power lines and knocked out electricity throughout the isolated seaside community of about 750 people.

When it stopped, people gathered in the street. Some were visibly distraught. Shouts of "You all right?" were heard. Then car engines began revving up as residents raced to the only access road to the closest higher ground, the 150-foot-high Bell Hill, in case of a tsunami, said William Bowman, a resident. None materialized, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Residents of Northern California coastal communities have reason to worry about tsunamis. In 1964, a magnitude 9.2 earthquake off the Alaskan coast sent a catastrophic tsunami to Crescent City, north of Eureka, killing 11 people.

On Saturday, 25,000 customers lost power, according to Pacific Gas & Electric Co. Water and gas lines were also disrupted.

Frayed nerves were evident throughout the Humboldt County region as dusk fell. Rooms at Mad River Community Hospital in Arcata, 15 miles north of Eureka, were in the dark, and patients in robes were sitting in the hallway. Generators provided only enough power to keep vital machinery working, said nursing supervisor Annie Conkler.

"Everyone's shaken, but fine," she said, adding that there were no patients with quake-related injuries coming into the emergency room.

At Myrtle Avenue Pet Center on Hubbard Lane in Eureka, owner Melanie Noe spent the evening picking up shampoo bottles and shattered dog bowls. The only other casualties were the cats' nerves, she said.

On the other side of town, lamps and dishes crashed down at Antiques and Goodies, causing a couple to run out

of the store, while two women took cover under a table. "We've been through a lot of earthquakes, but I can't recall there ever being any this bad," said store owner Sandra Hall.

To the south, floodlights fell at the Humboldt County Fairgrounds, and windows shattered in Ferndale. Farther south, in Redway, shoppers abandoned their carts in a grocery store and raced to their cars.

State officials said authorities in the county have not asked for additional assistance from Sacramento.

"It looks like they will be able to handle it on their own," said Kelly Huston, a spokesman for the California Emergency Management Agency. "Our big concern now is aftershocks."

At least 10 aftershocks were reported in the hours after the temblor, the strongest of them registering 4.2.

Richard Allen, a UC Berkeley seismologist, said the area where the earthquake occurred was in the Mendocino Triple Junction, where three tectonic plates collide: the Pacific, North American and Juan de Fuca. It is one of the most seismically active parts of the San Andreas fault system that runs through the state.

"Although 6.5 is a large event, it is not uncommon there by any means," said Richard Buckmaster, a U.S. Geological Survey geophysicist.

The last major quakes in the offshore region, Buckmaster said, were magnitude 7.2 and 6.6 temblors in June 2005.