

Tsunami experts say better safe than sorry

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CRESCENT CITY, Calif. - Coastal dwellers in far northern California and southern Oregon knew to take it seriously when tsunami sirens sounded after a 7.2-magnitude offshore earthquake, and thousands of people were safely evacuated within minutes.

Many here still remember the 1964 tsunami that killed 15 people along this stretch of the Pacific Coast.

And while there were no destructive waves after Tuesday night's temblor, experts Wednesday praised the decision to announce a tsunami warning for the entire West Coast - better safe than sorry, they said.

Emergency managers in coastal communities also said the warning gave them a chance to test out their systems, and see what needs fixing should true disaster strike.

The quake actually did generate a tsunami of 1 centimeter - roughly the width of an adult's finger. It wasn't detected by any equipment on shore, but rather an ocean pressure-measuring buoy located about 350 miles off the coast of California.

"This was the perfect tsunami - it was small and it tested the system," said Costas Synolakis, director of the Tsunami Research Center at the University of Southern California. "Now, people know how quickly they need to respond."

Officials in Oregon were glad the warning was issued so quickly, particularly given the devastation from a tsunami triggered by a quake near Sumatra on Dec. 26. The massive waves killed more than 176,000 people in 11 countries.

"Based on everything that we saw in the Indian Ocean, it is critical to get the message out to people," said Jay Wilson, the Earthquake and Tsunami Program Coordinator in Oregon's Office of Emergency Management.

In Crescent City, there were several reported car accidents as people jammed the roads, trying to make their way out of town, said resident Calvin Maready. Others decided to go down to the beach, to wait for the waves. "I don't know what was going through their heads," he said.

Six minutes after the quake struck at 7:50 p.m. about 90 miles southwest of Crescent City, the West Coast & Alaska Tsunami Warning Center issued the first warning, for the West Coast from the U.S. Mexico Border to Vancouver Island.

That warning - and not a watch or an advisory - was issued because policies dictate such action for quakes greater than a magnitude 7 located so near the coast, said Greg Romano, a National Weather Service spokesman.

Responses to the West Coast warning varied. While sirens sounded and evacuations took place in Crescent City and parts of Oregon's coast, people elsewhere heard the warnings through radio reports and informational crawls on TV. Many others heard nothing.

"Crescent City did very well," Synolakis said. "The rest of the coast, it was wait and see. But I don't know - had there had been a big tsunami - if this wait-and-see attitude would have carried the day."

In Brookings, a retirement community just over the Oregon border from California, police Lt. John Bishop said the city needs to work on how to keep emergency 911 telephone lines open should a real tsunami hit.

The warning "almost shut our 911 system down, and we don't want people to call asking if we had an earthquake," he said. "We need to leave those lines open for services."

Associated Press writer Matthew Fordahl in San Jose, Julia Silverman in Portland, Ore., and Doug Esser in Seattle contributed to this report.