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Contact: Patti Sutch, Executive Director, Western States Seismic Policy Council
916-444-6816

How Good is Tsunami Preparedness in the United States?
10 Years of Progress after the Devastating 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami

Sacramento - On the 10-year anniversary of the deadly December 26, 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, coastal communities in the U.S. are significantly better prepared for tsunamis than they have been at any time in the past. Tsunami preparedness programs at the State, Territory, and Commonwealth level have worked through the Western States Seismic Policy Council (WSSPC) and the National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program (NTHMP) to improve tsunami preparedness at a local level.

Over the past decade, these local tsunami programs have provided communities scientific-based tsunami hazard assessments, emergency response products, and public education support which have and will continue to save lives during tsunamis along U.S. coasts. A consequence of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami was the passage of the Tsunami Warning and Education Act (TWEA), which provided funding to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Tsunami Program and enabled this work under the NTHMP to continue. Though efforts to reauthorize the TWEA fell short in the last Congress, this important work must continue to ensure the safety of our coastlines.

Although the TWEA has not been renewed, the original state partners continue to receive limited financial support from NOAA and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and both the NTHMP and WSSPC provide the platform for making sure the work of the state partners is done in an accurate and consistent manner throughout the U.S. Some key highlights of these integrated and ongoing efforts include:

- Developing detailed tsunami hazard maps, which form the basis for emergency response and evacuation plans for all coastal communities.
- Providing assistance and communication networks for all communities to receive and understand tsunami alert messages from both the National and Pacific Tsunami Warning Centers.
- Assisting the National Weather Service in encouraging and supporting communities to become recognized as TsunamiReady.
- Purchasing tsunami hazard signs and providing guidance on where those signs should be placed for consistency between communities.
- Promoting tsunami education and outreach through community lectures, workshops, exercises, and drills.
- Communicating community needs to federal tsunami and earthquake hazard mitigation programs.

“All our partners work together to make sure every coastal community is prepared for the next tsunami,” says Kevin Miller, NTHMP Mitigation and Education Subcommittee Co-chair and California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services Tsunami Lead, “especially those communities with a large local tsunami threat where continuous public education and preparedness is so vital.”
Coastal communities of state partners in the NTHMP and WSSPC face threats from local tsunami sources, where those at risk may have only minutes to evacuate. This is not enough time for federal “warning systems” to effectively recognize and communicate the tsunami risk to the public before the first wave arrives. For this reason, improving tsunami preparedness within communities has been a priority for NTHMP/WSSPC members. This will better ensure the safety of the coastal residents and visitors, and reduce the potential for life-loss in the next tsunami.

In recent years, there have been a number of key advances by NTHMP/WSSPC members that will greatly reduce the exposure of residents and damage to coastal assets from tsunami hazards:

- The State of Washington is supporting local efforts though ‘Project Safe Haven’ and constructing the nation’s first tsunami vertical evacuation refuge at the Ocosta Elementary School in Westport, Washington. This effort focuses on integrating “vertical evacuation” strategies in the construction of schools and other buildings in areas without natural high ground if they are located in tsunami hazard zones. Oregon is also evaluating the need for vertical evacuation utilizing a new approach that provides communities with estimates of minimum pedestrian evacuation speed to reach safety before a locally generated tsunami can strike.

- Oregon and other states are working together to create tsunami hazard planning maps and resources for harbors and ports. Always the first areas to be impacted by tsunamis, maritime communities are able to update their tsunami response plans with information about in-harbor hazards from strong currents and offshore safe areas for vessel evacuation.

- California, building upon previously released response planning maps, is initiating production of new tsunami hazard maps and strategies which will help improve pre-tsunami building design and land-use as well as post-tsunami recovery planning.

- Hawaii is updating their tsunami evacuation maps based on new information regarding potential larger tsunami threats. California is developing new evacuation “playbooks” to help communities plan for tsunamis of different sizes considering tidal and storm conditions.

- Alaska produces tsunami hazard maps and enhances community readiness with annual Tsunami Operations Workshops. Community leaders, first responders, and emergency managers attend to learn basics of preparedness, response and recovery. The workshops include basic tsunami science, hazard assessment, warning dissemination/reception methods, evacuation procedures, strategies to reduce tsunami risk and table-top exercises. Alaska commemorated the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Alaska earthquake and tsunami, enhancing its public education and outreach campaigns.

“Each of our WSSPC partners is doing cutting edge work with regard to tsunami preparedness and mitigation,” says Patti Sutch, WSSPC Executive Director. “WSSPC is very pleased to provide a venue for collaboration between our members and other coastal communities.”

Because of overarching programs like the NTHMP and WSSPC, this new work is more effectively being shared and duplicated in other regions of the U.S. These collaborations are improving the overall resiliency of all coastal communities.

For more information, please visit the following websites:
WSSPC Tsunami Center: http://www.wsspc.org/resources-reports/tsunami-center/
NTHMP website: http://nws.weather.gov/nthmp/
Tsunami preparedness information: http://TsunamiZone.org
Alaska tsunami program:
http://ready.alaska.gov/
http://www.aeic.alaska.edu/tsunami/intro.html

California tsunami program:
http://www.calema.ca.gov/PlanningandPreparedness/Pages/Tsunami-Preparedness.aspx
http://www.tsunami.ca.gov

Hawaii tsunami program:
http://scd.hawaii.gov/index.html
http://www.ore.hawaii.edu/OE/ore_research.htm

Oregon tsunami program:
http://www.oregongeology.org/tsuclearinghouse/default.htm

Washington tsunami program:
http://mil.wa.gov/emergency-management-division/hazards/tsunami
http://dnr.wa.gov/ResearchScience/Topics/GeologicHazardsMapping/Pages/tsunamis.aspx