



1. JAPAN QUAKE: Earthquake, tsunami kill hundreds in Japan; waves hit U.S. West Coast *(Greenwire, 03/11/2011)*

John McArdle and Colin Sullivan, E&E reporters

The death toll in Japan began creeping into the hundreds, and Hawaii, Alaska and most of the U.S. West Coast remained under a tsunami warning after a massive earthquake struck off the east coast of Honshu, Japan.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the 8.9 magnitude quake struck 230 miles northeast of Tokyo and 80 miles east of Sendai, Japan, just before 3 p.m. Japan Standard Time.

President Obama opened a previously scheduled press conference on energy issues this afternoon by offering condolences to those affected by the disaster.

"Today's events remind us of how fragile life can be," the president said, noting that he had already spoken to the Japanese prime minister and a U.S. ship was heading to the Mariana Islands to lend assistance.

State Department officials said in a conference call late this morning that there had been no reports of Americans injured or killed. Spokesman P.J. Crowley wrote in a Twitter post that "we have been in touch with the Japanese government and we stand ready to provide whatever assistance needed in response to the tsunami."

Crowley noted that U.S. Ambassador John Roos has moved the U.S. Embassy's command center to an alternative location due to possible aftershocks from the quake in Tokyo. He wrote that Roos has also spoken with Japanese Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to providing support as Japan identifies what is needed.

Meanwhile, the White House urged those in regions that could be affected by possible tsunami conditions to listen to alerts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and local news and follow directions provided by local officials.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Craig Fugate said in a release that the agency is in "close contact and coordination with state and local officials and stand[s] ready to support them in any way needed."

In Hawaii, most schools were closed this morning and Gov. Neil Abercrombie (D) ordered non-essential government employees to stay home. He asked residents in tsunami inundation zones to make their way to higher ground or report to the nearest shelters.

But early reports out of Hawaii said there was no significant damage in the hours after tsunami waves began to hit.

The biggest wave recorded by noon by NOAA's Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, which is run through the National Weather Service: a 6-foot wave that hit Kahului, Maui.

Hawaii Sen. Daniel Inouye (D) asked all residents in a Twitter post this morning to continue to heed warnings from state and county civil defense until the all-clear is sounded.

Inouye also posted that his wife, Irene, was in Tokyo leading a delegation from the state when the earthquake hit but said that all in her delegation were OK.

California

In California, surfing, fishing and boating were banned this morning up and down the coast as cities and counties issued a mix of mandatory and voluntary tsunami evacuations in reaction to the quake.

By the time the initial swell reached California early this morning, tides were reported as high as 7 feet along the California-Oregon line. According to a report on NPR, authorities in Humboldt County, in Northern California, went door-to-door asking people to get to higher ground.

In Santa Cruz, a coastal town south of San Francisco, there were reports of damage to boats and docks as surges struck. In Los Angeles, beaches were closed, and the Port of Los Angeles had temporarily suspended cargo operations as of 8 a.m. Pacific Standard Time.

In San Francisco, a mandatory evacuation order had not been issued. Officials at the city and county of San Francisco said they had closed the upper and lower Great Highway on the coast, while the National Park Service had closed Ocean Beach, Baker Beach, China Beach and Fort Funston, all within the city.

An official from the California Emergency Management Agency said residents close to vulnerable "inundation" areas in low-lying lands had been evacuated in Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and San Mateo County, among other locations. On NPR, the waves reaching the shore were reported to cause significant property damage in Santa Cruz, with docks and boats tossing around as the surge continued this morning.

Schools were also closed along the coast in places that include Half Moon Bay and Pacifica in San Mateo County. The National Weather Service had issued a warning to those living near the beach or in low-lying areas to move inland or to higher ground. The service said people should stay away from harbors and inlets especially.

Higher currents were expected to last a few hours. The National Weather Service said the tsunami inundation could measure anywhere from 3.5 to 7 feet along the California coast.

On the Hill

As the tsunami warnings and advisories continued to be issued and reassessed by the National Weather Service, today's disaster seems likely to add another angle to the ongoing debate over some of the deep budget cuts being contemplated on Capitol Hill.

Just yesterday, at a nomination hearing, Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) told a NOAA nominee that spending cuts being considered by Congress could endanger the agency's ability to track dangerous weather patterns, like hurricanes, with the accuracy it has today.

"I'm not going to vote that way, but I think the majority in the House and certainly the Senate will," Rockefeller said.

National Weather Service Employees Organization president Dan Sobien said today that one message that should come out of today's disaster is that the National Weather Service should be treated like FEMA or other agencies in the Department of Homeland Security ([see related story](#)).

"By far most of the natural disasters in the country are weather, or in this case geologically, related," he said. "If Congress thinks it's a good idea to dismantle that warning system that's out there saving people's lives, I just think that's a big mistake. That's penny-wise and pound-foolish. It takes a big disaster before people, in this case Congress, wakes up and says, 'Yeah, we do need this. This is something we are spending money on.'"

In San Francisco, Mayor Edwin Lee warned that the massive earthquake shows the need for preparedness in California.

"This is a stark reminder to our city that we must always be prepared for the next disaster to ensure our families are safe," he said in a statement.

Reporter Elana Schor contributed.

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