

Earthquake Hits During Tsunami Exercise

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STORY SUMMARY>>>

Tuesday's destructive earthquake off the coast of Samoa in the south Pacific struck as officials at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Ewa Beach were conducting a training exercise.

"It turned out to be a great trial run," said Gerard Fryer, a geophysicist at the center.

A three member team from the Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Seattle, Washington was on Oahu when the tsunami alarms sounded. The team was in the process of analyzing how new computer software would be utilized by officials at the warning center.



"That event actually gave us a chance to test these tools in real time with real data and with real action," said Vasily Titov, project leader of the Seattle team. "It's absolutely amazing."

The warning center in Ewa Beach monitors 39 buoys across the Pacific Ocean. The buoys sound an alarm anytime an earthquake triggers a rise in sea levels. The center also tracks seismic stations continuously around the globe.

"After (an alarm) we are really looking at our sea level gauges and trying to find evidence of a tsunami and measure it and use those measurements about what can happen further away from the source," said Pacific Tsunami Warning Center Director Charles McCreery.

Officials say advances in technology prevented a full scale evacuation of coastal areas in Hawaii during Tuesday's event.

"If this had been a decade ago Hawaii would now be in a warning," said Fryer. "What we've been able to do is cancel that and just say we want people to stay off the beaches."

A tsunami watch for the Hawaiian Islands issued at 8:05 a.m. was downgraded to an advisory by 10:23 in the morning. Officials urged people to stay out of the ocean until after 7 p.m. because of the possibility of strong currents and tidal surges.

PAST TSUNAMIS

Destructive tsunamis originating in the south Pacific don't happen very often, but scientists learned an important lesson from the 2004 tsunami that devastated Indonesia and other countries that border the Indian Ocean. It's estimated that tsunami killed 150,000 people.

"The big lesson from the 2004 earthquake was that these places that don't have many earthquakes, every once in a while they can generate a really big one," said Fryer.

The last destructive tsunami to hit Hawaii was on March 27, 1964 from an earthquake in Alaska.

"We've had many decades go by without a major tsunami," said McCreery. "We can count ourselves lucky for that but we know it will occur again."

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