

Government and military leaders plan for tsunami awareness

Gov. Abercrombie declares April 2013 as Tsunami Awareness Month

**Story and photos by
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HONOLULU - Hawaii Gov. Neil Abercrombie issued a proclamation naming April 2013 Tsunami Awareness Month at the State Capitol on April 1.

The Hawaii State Civil Defense, mayor of the City and County of Honolulu, Department of Emergency Management, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's National Weather Service, and representatives from Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam and other Department of Defense agencies joined the governor. The proclamation emphasizes the importance of tsunami awareness and preparedness for residents and visitors in Hawaii. According to the Pacific Disaster Center, tsunamis have accounted for more lost lives in Hawaii than any other type of local disasters. In the 20th century, an estimated 221 people have been killed by tsunamis, most of which occurred on the Big Island in 1946 and 1960. April 1, 2013 marks the 67th anniversary of the Hilo tsunami, one of the deadliest waves to strike the islands. "It's a rather sobering experience today," Abercrombie said. "It was a little over two years ago that I had my first formal confrontation with the responsibilities associated with dealing with the possibility of a major tsunami hitting the islands of Hawaii."

On March 11, 2011, an 8.9-magnitude earthquake off the coast near Natori, Miyagi, Japan generated a tsunami felt across the Pacific. The largest quake on Japanese record shook buildings across Tokyo and unleashed a seven-meter-high tsunami that killed hundreds as it engulfed towns on the northern Japanese coast. More than 20 countries around the Pacific Rim were put on alert to brace for a potential tsunami. Abercrombie said he remembers the anxiety of preparing and waiting for the wave to hit.

"Instead of it being almost momentary, as Japan experienced, we had a considerable amount of time to think about and to go over what it was we are prepared to do," Abercrombie said. "And to examine postscript, post tsunami, what it is we might do to be better prepared, if we needed to be."

Improving the tsunami alert system is key to Hawaii being able to respond prepared to natural disasters. Lessons learned since the surprise tsunami of 1946 led to the creation of the alert system used today. While the governor was speaking, right on cue, the monthly tsunami alarm started blaring across the state to signal the monthly test, which is held the first working day of the month at 11:45 a.m.

"I'm very, very pleased to say that I have really complete confidence in the capacity of the various agencies, individuals and groups that have responsibility with regard to a tsunami, both with the point of view of the warning and the point of view of awareness," he said.

"[I'm] Very, very proud and happy that we've been able to work in a cooperative and collaborative way across government agencies, non-profits, police agencies, federal, state and local entities to come up with the plan that we have and to make sure the public knows that we are prepared," Abercrombie said.

“Part of the reason for having ‘Tsunami Awareness Month’ is we don’t want to get complacent that we will never have a tsunami of that magnitude,” Abercrombie said.

Tsunamis are a series of waves varying in height. Abercrombie warned people to take higher ground instead of testing the strength of a tsunami by refusing to evacuate coastal areas.

“How do we save lives,” said Dr. Gerald Fryer, senior geophysics at NOAA’s Pacific Tsunami Warning Center. “The tsunami warning system has improved, and it gets better every day. We have learned a lot. The number of unnecessary warnings is really going down. So when we issue a warning, it’s for real.”

Capt. Jeffrey James, commander of Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, agreed that it is important for people to be prepared to deal with an impending tsunami and be prepared to evacuate to higher ground.

“You have to heed the warning,” James said. “The science behind a warning is pretty solid. We’re prepared. We are a tsunami ready base, the first base in Hawaii to become tsunami ready, which means we have a plan. We’ve looked at it very closely, and very critically, are in close communications with city and state civil defense, as well as higher headquarters in the military.” The agencies at the proclamation event urged the people of Hawaii to take immediate action in the event of a tsunami warning and follow the alerts on media, radio, television or social media outlets.

INFO BOX:

Residents and personnel on JBPHH can receive updates on JBPHH Facebook website, www.cniv.navy.mil/pearlharbor-hickam, Joint Base Television (Oceanic Ch. 2), and the JBPHH Straight Talk Line at 808-421-4000.