

Lessons learned from tsunami warning

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It's been quite an eventful weekend, as thousands evacuated their homes Saturday night when a state tsunami warning was issued at about 7:45 p.m.

That warning was downgraded just after 1 a.m. to an advisory, and then lifted completely at 4 a.m. today.

Things have settled down at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center and I was able speak to with experts in-depth about the sequence of events, and lessons learned.

Once the 7.7 magnitude earthquake rocked an island off Canada experts at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center were busy monitoring the seismic activity and buoys across the Pacific.

"If the earthquake exceeds magnitude 7.9, Hawaii automatically goes into a watch," explained Charles McCreery, Director of the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center.

But this particular earthquake didn't meet that threshold.

However experts saw an unexpected wave pattern building.

"In this particular case, the energy that came out of that region, got bent around into a beam that came right at the state of Hawaii," said McCreery.

There's no history of strong tsunamis coming from that part of the Pacific and therefore, no buoys were strategically placed between the quake's epicenter and the Hawaiian islands

"That main beam of energy didn't cross one of the buoys, the buoys were way off to the side of that main beam," said McCreery.

But based on the data available wave models showed a threat to Hawaii.

A tsunami warning was issued around 7:45 p.m. and sirens sounded across the state.

The evacuations created some havoc on the roadways.

"There was a lot of traffic especially at the gas stations," described Vernon Chang, Ewa Beach resident.

And forced some businesses to close shop early.

"By the time we got up and walked out, the restaurant was pretty much empty," said Melvin Kiaaina, Ewa Beach resident.

The first wave arrived just around 10:30 p.m. as experts expected.

But not at three to eight feet as originally predicted.

At the end of the night, the largest to hit was about 2.5 feet at Kahului on Maui.

"This might be about 16 hours of data, you can see many cycles and eventually it's dying," points out McCreery.

By day break, all beaches across the state were reopened- with the exception of Hanauma bay which remained closed as a precaution.

Fortunately no injuries or major damage was reported as a result of the tsunami surges.

"There's no regrets, from all the data we have, pointed to a possible threat for Hawaii, and we just cant roll the dice with peoples lives. So we have to keep up our vigilance, and don't become complacent because of the event that happened last night," said McCreery.

"Its good, better safe than sorry," added Chang.

The experts are looking into possibly repositioning some of the buoys to better cover tsunami threats from Canada.

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