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Tim Obert, center, and other dock workers strain to unload and lock down a vintage 1943 wooden boat as the dock gradually splintered and gave way under Friday's tsunami surges.

Tsunami wreaks havoc at Santa Cruz harbor

Surge sinks, damages vessels as crowds flock to coast

By CATHY KELLY

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SANTA CRUZ — A destructive tsunami triggered by an 8.9 earthquake off the coast of Japan sent waves surging onto the Santa Cruz County coastline Friday, creating nothing more than a spectacle on the shoreline except at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor, where a forceful shove from the sea sunk 17

vessels and damaged up to 50 more. No injuries were immediately reported countywide.

Boat owners and others gathered alongside the battered harbor and crowded onto a nearby bridge and hillside, gasping as waves swept the docks, sending boats crashing into one another after the first surge arrived at 7:45

SEE HARBOR ON A5

HARBOR

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a.m. Some boats floated into the harbor channel or tipped sideways, taking on water and sinking.

Harbormaster Lisa Ekers pegged damage to harbor facilities, including, docks, pilings and other infrastructure, at \$17 million. She said the district would seek assistance from state and federal authorities to make repairs, but said the financial damage to privately owned boats was not immediately known.

The damage led Gov. Jerry Brown to declare the county a state of emergency that will qualify the county to seek state aid. A state of emergency was also issued for San Mateo, Humboldt and Del Norte counties as a result of the tsunami.

Friday morning, as news footage showed the tsunami's devastation across Japan, county emergency officials called 6,600 residences in low-lying coastal areas in the county at 6:40 a.m., recommending they evacuate. Authorities did not have an exact figure of how many people left, but in Watsonville, roads leading out of town were jammed with panicked people, lines formed at gas stations and cash machines, and few students showed up for school.

Road shoulders along Highway 92 near Half Moon Bay and Highway 17 out of Santa Cruz were turned into parking lots, with the California Highway Patrol directing traffic and Caltrans even bringing in portable toilets for evacuees. Traffic lightened up later in the day, as fears of a major tsunami dampened.

Officials closed the county's beaches as an evacuation calls went out, but reopened them at 5 p.m. with advice for residents to stay away due to the strong currents. A number of surfers defied the warnings, taking to the water throughout the day for the novelty of riding a tsunami wave, even though swells did not exceed 5 feet in the Santa Cruz area, according to the National Weather Service.

Amid warnings from the state Office of Emergency Services, the county's administrative officer, Susan Mauriello, issued a local emergency proclamation at noon, which was lifted by the early evening as the tsunami warning was downgraded to an advisory by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center. Roads that were closed near the beaches, including the Beach Flats neighborhood in Santa Cruz and Capitola Village, were reopened by early evening and evacuees were allowed to return.

Evacuation centers were set up at Jade Street Park, the Santa Cruz Civic Center, the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds and the Davenport fire station. They closed Friday afternoon. Business at the Boardwalk and wharf areas were disrupted as well.

Sheriff's Sgt. Dan Campos said residents should stay away from the coastal areas until authorities give the all clear, which may take as long as 10 hours to 12 hours. But few seemed to heed that call. Traffic was congested in several areas around the harbor Friday afternoon, and Seventh Avenue was a crawl in both directions from the harbor to Soquel Avenue.

Enrique Sahagun, a public information officer at the county's emer-

gency operations center, said local damage was limited to the harbor. Salvage boats, including those from the state Department of Fish and Game, helped pluck large chunks of wood and other debris from the water and to moor loose boats.

Harbormaster Ekers said it will take a couple of days before full damage is tallied and discovered at the harbor.

"There might be damage that we can't see as some of these structures get more and more fatigued," she said.

Ekers said the harbor would remain closed Friday night but would reopen after 8 a.m. if boat owners want to check on their property. Ekers planned a press conference for Saturday morning to provide updates on the damage.

HARBOR HIT HARD

At 2:30 p.m., more than six hours after the first surge hit the harbor, yet another rush of water smacked the channel, freeing a large power boat from beleaguered U dock on the inland side of the Murray/Eaton Street bridge that bisects the harbor. At that spot, 10 pilings stuck out from the water, no longer surrounded by wooden docks.

Sheriff's deputies were stationed at every harbor walkway leading to the water. Boat owners yelled for help, with one shouting, "My boat is hanging by a thread, sheriff!" Deputies summoned Harbor Patrol, and officers on a patrol boat grabbed a loose boat and tied it to the end of the dock. Applause rang out.

The harbor is home to 827 wet slips and 225 vessels in dry storage. In addition to the 17 boats sunk, officials believe up to 50 boats were damaged and two were possibly lost at sea.

Gordon Rudy said his 36-foot Sea Ray cabin cruiser, Donovan's Reef, nearly washed away despite the three ropes he had tied to it. He said the water pulled the cleat right out of the Fiberglas on the boat.

"It's very strong," he said. "But now, if the surges don't get worse, it should be OK. I am worried about those loose boats; they are like loose cannons spiraling around. It becomes a domino effect."

Rudy, who is living on Donovan's Reef after renting out his Boulder Creek home, said he saw three boats sink at that spot.

"It's kind of a sad day," Rudy said. "But this is just stuff. It's nothing compared to Japan."

Harbormaster Ekers said officials were working with county environmental health to determine the level of contamination from an unknown number of submerged boats and floating debris. She said officials began sealing off the harbor's fuel supply at 4:30 a.m. and shoring up whatever they could. At 5 a.m. officials notified those aboard the 50 livable units and closed the harbor about 6 a.m.

While boat owners rose before dawn to secure boats in anticipation of the tsunami, the power of the surges proved too much. Foam-filled concrete bricks broke free from underneath docks, and during the first seaward surge of the water, whitecaps topped the water rushing beneath the Murray Street bridge.

"Once the docks go, it doesn't matter what (the boats) are tied to," said Scott Sommers, the mayor of the harbor's U dock.

Several of the docks at the harbor were damaged including half of the U

dock, which had 30 boats to 40 boats tied to it as well as a portion of the X, J, G and AA docks. Debris from the docks and pieces of boats are floating around the harbor, some having been washed out to sea.

One man jumped into the sea to save his craft, while boat owners huddled and cried as the surges carried debris back and forth, thrashing at vessels. One boat capsized and crashed into a dredger parked in the harbor mouth, while the U.S. Coast Guard and volunteers worked to secure adrift boats careening through the channel.

"I just couldn't believe it was happening," said a haggard-looking Jody Connelly, whose boat capsized. "I'm in disbelief at the moment."

About 2 p.m., a red Sea-Doo personal watercraft floated on its side near the Crow's Nest Restaurant, a yellow rope trailing along behind it. A second jet ski type craft floated near the mouth of the harbor, capsized.

Sina Ehteshani was soaked up to his chest after jumping in the water after one of his Sea-Doos, which broke free during surges that began just before 8 a.m. He thought he had secured them in a slip near the Crow's Nest, but the water proved too strong.

"I saw it break free and I just jumped in," said Ehteshani, who injured his hand in the incident.

Jill Craviotto, who has worked at the Crow's Nest for about 20 years, said she has never seen anything like the destruction caused when the harbor channel turned into a raging river. The restaurant was closed, serving only emergency responders.

"They just tied up these two small fishing boats," she said, pointing out the window. "They have been banging up and out again for a while. I really didn't think it was going to be that bad."

Some commercial fishing boats took to the open water rather than await possibility of a drained harbor that would leave some boats aground.

"All of a sudden the water started drawing out about 8 to 9 knots and it escalated quickly," Ekers said.

A deep sense of uncertainty about whether larger waves would crash ashore lingered at the harbor, all day.

Jeremy Leonard, who has a boat at the V dock, got to the harbor about 8:30 a.m. saw a power boat float out of the harbor channel.

"It's a massive amount of water going out of a narrow channel and it's really jacking things up," Leonard said.

Chad Aleck said he saw a beautiful fishing boat sink.

"It's absolute insanity down here," he said.

Just after 11 a.m., Santa Cruz police issued mandatory evacuations for the lower harbor dock area, after getting reports of further surges. When one arrived a few moments later, some people panicked and ran from the harbor up to higher ground. Harbor Patrol boat operators using a bullhorn urged people to get to higher ground, as the sound of boats colliding rung out and one half-submerged sailboat floated quickly under the bridge heading toward the harbor mouth.

Some of the boats that sank or were damaged at U dock are houseboats. People huddling around the dock, watching, said their neighbors

there are like family.

Chris Busick, a Ben Lomond computer network administrator, lost his 1970 Cal 2-24 sailboat, Perspective, at U dock.

"That boat has been in the harbor for 40 years, and has survived other tsunamis," Busick said. "But the dock broke. At first, it looked like it had dodged a bullet, but the surge pushed in under the docks and it took on water and was rolled by a big wave. I saw the bow float by. I loved that boat, it's a classic. The hull is bullet-proof."

CURIOSITY AT THE COAST

Tom O'Brien came to the harbor mouth after being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by a neighbor. He came to see the effects of the tsunami.

"We were here for the last tsunami" caused by the 2010 Chilean earthquake, O'Brien said. "This one's way bigger."

Just before 8 a.m., when the first waves hit, there was a crowd gathered at Lighthouse Point on the Westside. Surfers were in the water trying to catch some of the waves, but it was much less crowded than normal at Steamer's Lane.

Loren Burke, 23, of La Selva Beach, was surfing Friday morning with three friends. Burke grew up in the county and doesn't remember hearing a tsunami warning before. He said he was excited seeing the ocean this morning, but didn't expect to see a big wave hit.

"The waves were about 7 foot and it was a lot of fun," Burke said after he got out of the water just after 8 a.m.

At Cowell Beach, surfers watched as the tsunami surge sucked water out of the area before sending waves back in. Several people reported that on Main Beach, the ocean also retreated significantly before rushing back in.

At their highest point Friday, waves in the Santa Cruz area reached about 5 feet, almost double the height seen in Monterey, said Chris Stumps, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

"Activity is starting to dwindle down," he said at 6 p.m. Friday. "While it's still dangerous to be around the coast, due to potential aftershocks and strong currents, we've downgraded from a tsunami warning to an advisory."

There were far fewer spectators in South County. Palm Beach at the end of Beach Road was deserted at noon.

Donna Davison had been up on the dunes a few minutes earlier, but was heading home. Until a year ago, the Watsonville resident had lived in Oklahoma and was more familiar with tornadoes. She said she took her camera out to her favorite beach to get some shots of a tsunami, but there wasn't much to see.

"You can tell the waves are pulling up a bit more sand," she said.

Nearby, many Pajaro Dunes residents left earlier as county officials recommended evacuation, though some had begun to return, said Carol Turley, homeowner association manager. She said the biggest fear was of a seawater surge into Watsonville Slough that could flood roads in the seaside condo complex.

Emergency helicopters hovered uneasily along large stretches of beach, while police officers stood sentry next to barricades set up to prevent vehicles from entering beach-

front areas in Aptos, Rio del Mar and Capitola. At Rio del Mar State Beach, waves rushed toward shore before crashing against the rocks, the sound all but drowning out the faint thump of the helicopter blades.

Fifteen-year Rio del Mar resident Dave Pate, a retiree and former surfer, said he heard about the tsunami threat around 6:45 a.m. and wandered down to the Rio del Mar State Beach to check out the wave action.

"It was the lowest low tide I've ever seen in Santa Cruz," said Pate.

While he took in the view from the parking lot, his daughter got a bird's-eye view from her perch atop a nearby, grassy dune.

"She said the water actually went back to the end of the pier to where the front of the boat is, and from our vantage point here, we could see the hole in the rudder area of the boat," Pate said. "The part of the Cement Ship that's usually underwater, the broken part of it, was all showing, almost down to the sand."

In Capitola, police officers and volunteers stood next to barricades set up to block access to the village, directing all but residents to park in a nearby parking lot and walk down to the shops and restaurants. Young boys on skateboards lazily cruised along the mostly deserted streets, while hungry pedestrians peered inside restaurants, many of which appeared closed.

"Is there a 'tsunami special?'" Capitola resident Laura Disalvo asked as she entered Pizza My Heart.

Disalvo said she kept her daughter, Ashley Disalvo, out of school as a precautionary measure, and the two decided to head down to the village for an early lunch and to take in the sights.

"We've been coming down every day since November," said Disalvo, who recently moved from Los Gatos. "There's always cars, it's always non-stop. Now, it's like an eerie ghost town. It just doesn't feel right."

At Seascape Resort in Aptos, yellow caution tape was stretched tightly across the trees standing on either side of a trail that winds its way down to the beach. In an outcropping of the grassy park behind the resort, an elderly man stood in front of an easel, quietly humming to himself as he stroked another splash of color onto a half-completed landscape painting.

The last tsunami to reach the area stemmed from an 8.8-magnitude earthquake in Chile in February 2010. Waves reached about 15 feet at the harbor during the surge and beaches were closed for a day.

A tsunami advisory also was issued for coastal California in September 2009, an 8.0 quake struck American Samoa, prompting beach closures and the relocation of campers in low-lying areas. The harbor also saw surges from another underwater earthquake in Japan in November 2006.

During the past 200 years, only a few tsunamis have caused significant damage along the California coast, Gary Griggs, director of the Institute of Marine Sciences at UC Santa Cruz said after the 2010 tsunami. A surge in April 1946 caused the death of a man walking at Cowell Beach when water rose 15 feet above normal after an earthquake near Alaska.

Staff writers Jason Hoppin, J.M. Brown, Kimberly White, Jenna Brogan and Julie Copeland contributed to this report.