

# A YEAR LATER, HARBOR STILL RECOVERING Long Road Ahead

TWO DOCKS COMPLETED; WORK COULD LAST THROUGH 2013



New signs at Twin Lakes State Beach inform beachgoers they are entering a tsunami zone.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Harbor-2012

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By JASON HOPPIN

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Sailboats glide by, the chatter of outdoor diners fills the air and crab can be bought straight off the boat, but the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor has a long way to go before normal returns to port.

A year after a tsunami turned the harbor into a whirl of tidal surges that tore apart slips and tossed around boats like toys, just two of 23 damaged docks have been replaced. Despite appearances, Port Director Lisa Ekers said, there is evidence of the work that remains right under the balls of your feet.

"On a real stormy day, you can be standing here on one of our docks and it's an e-ticket ride," Ekers said Friday, leading a tour of tsunami damage one year later.

On March 11, 2011, the 9.0-magnitude Great Tohoku earthquake, one of the five strongest recorded in history, shifted Tokyo, the largest metropolitan area in the world, 8 feet to the east.

Located 32 miles offshore and 20 miles deep, the temblor shoved the Earth several inches off its axis and sent waves more than 100 feet high crashing into Japan, killing more than 15,000 people. The resulting tsunami set off several disasters, including the Fukushima Daiichi



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

Hundreds gather along the Santa Cruz harbor during the tsunami to watch boats ripped from their slips crash into one another.

nuclear meltdown and, when it reached Santa Cruz, the demolition of the harbor.

Recent damage estimates put the cost of repairs at \$17 million. Two docks that were completely destroyed — U and V docks — are finished, but the harbor estimates it won't be until the end of next year before all 23 are replaced, casualties of repeated surges that seemed as if they would never ebb.

"It wasn't like we had a tsunami. It was like

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## DAMAGE

ESTIMATED COST OF REPAIRS: \$17 million

DOCKS TO BE REPLACED: 23, of 29 total

DOCKS

COMPLETED: 2

COMPLETION DATE:

End of 2013

SOURCE: Sentinel reporting

## ON THE NET

To view a slideshow of the tsunami damage and hear Port Director Lisa Ekers talk about reconstruction efforts, visit [santacruzsentinel.com](http://santacruzsentinel.com)



## In tsunami's wake, support your harbor



DAN HAIFLEY  
Our Ocean Backyard

EDITOR'S NOTE: This column appeared on Sunday, March 13, 2011, two days after the tsunami. It's an eyewitness account from our regular ocean columnist and is re-printed here as it appeared then.

Perhaps it was just a fraction of the massive devastation and misery suffered in Japan as a result of the earthquake and tsunami Friday. But the surge that crossed the Pacific to repeatedly pound the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor was a cruel blow to those who gave time,

treasure and loving care to all that was damaged or lost that day.

The harbor became a war zone. For me it started with a call after 5 a.m. from Port Director Lisa Ekers. I called O'Neill Sea Odyssey staff, woke a school teacher in San Jose to cancel the ocean-going classes she had scheduled for that day and informed our building tenants of the tsunami warning. Tim O'Neill, Mike Egan and others began the long, tedious task of protecting

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# HARBOR

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we had 40 or 50 of them over the course of 36 hours," Ekers said.

Contractors are building several new docks off-site, including commercial off-loading docks the port hopes will be completed in time for the anticipated May 1 salmon opener.

## RELIVING THE DAY

Most at the harbor have returned to their slips, including several U dock residents who rose before dawn last March to try to save their boats. They had been through tsunami warnings before, but those had petered out without posing much of a threat.

This one was different. Just after 8 a.m., the water moved into the harbor as if bursting from a giant spigot, and over the next several days behaved in new and unwelcome ways.

The water would be pushed inland, the highest waves cresting at 5 feet, only to withdraw minutes later, tearing at moorings, pilings, utility hookups and dock floats.

As the water receded, boats would zip by, cast out to sea. Harbor patrol and the Coast Guard tried to rescue several, but in the end more than a dozen capsized, including two patrol boats. More than 100 were damaged, despite harbor residents' efforts to lash them down.

"That's why you saw so many boats floating around with docks attached to them. Because we did such a good job," said Scott Sommers, the unofficial mayor of close-knit U dock.

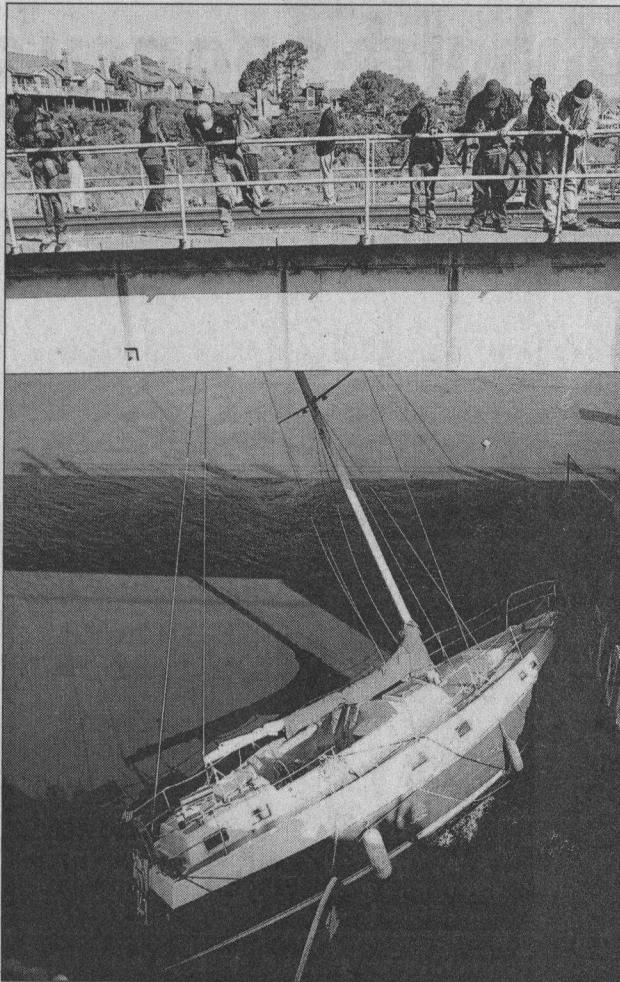
## THE HARBOR COMMUNITY

Since the tsunami, many residents have been moved around. Jody Connolly, a harbor resident whose capsized boat temporarily turned him into a couch surfer, now owns a bigger boat thanks to insurance money, and lives on G dock.

"Others weren't so lucky. Living on a boat can be expensive, and those without insurance have moved on.

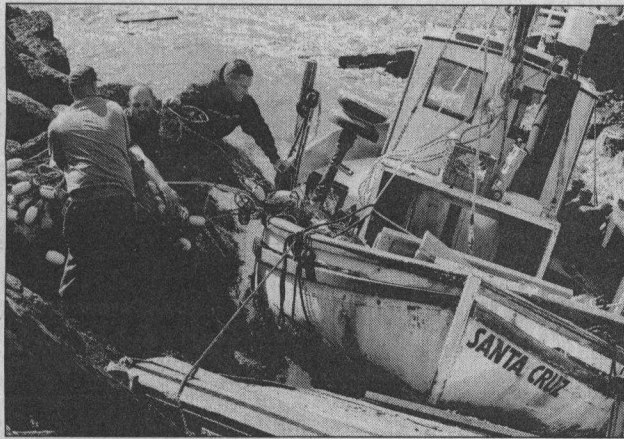
"We still see a lot of them. And we still have parties down on the docks," said Sommers, who praised the Coast Guard and others for helping residents during and after the tsunami. "The people that left are still in touch. We haven't lost touch with anybody."

There are frustrations that



LARISSA MUELLER/SENTINEL FILE

Bystanders on the railroad trestle bridge over the harbor lean over to get a better look at an unmoored boat whose mast caught on the bridge as the wake of a tsunami surge pulls it out to sea on March 11.



LARISSA MUELLER/SENTINEL FILE

Tim Obert, center, and other dockworkers strained to unload and lock down a vintage 1943 wooden boat as the dock gradually splintered and gave way under the March 11 tsunami surges.

repairs aren't coming faster. The harbor also has had to replace electrical systems that required digging up the harbor parking lot in places and slowing down the work.

"Our dock here is all patched together, it's in pretty bad shape," said commercial fisherman Mike Stiller. "Very slow."

Even if the off-loading docks are repaired before the salmon opener, commercial fishermen have slips on docks that are scheduled for repair. They could be dislodged by

the work, but harbor officials hope it won't affect their livelihood.

"Certainly, there will be an impact for those operators with having to relocate, but they will be relocated within the harbor," Ekers said.

## THE COST

To help foot its 6 percent share of the repairs — federal disaster aid is paying for the rest — the harbor recently raised slip fees 5 percent, which had some fisherman joking that the increase is the

only thing normal about harbor operations.

Whether the new docks would survive a similar event isn't totally clear. They are being built to industry standards, which assures they would withstand 2-foot waves. Though the 2011 tsunami sent larger surges into the harbor, Ekers said she is confident the dock's design can withstand a similar tsunami, rare as it was.

"In reality, our dock construction will withstand a much larger event" than 2-foot waves, Ekers said.

In a sense, Santa Cruz escaped a bigger disaster, since the tsunami arrived during a very low tide. Had it arrived hours earlier, damage likely would have been much more severe.

"We did get lucky. I can't say for sure, but if we'd had a really high tide we might have seen water in Beach Flats and Rio del Mar," said Paul Horvat, Santa Cruz County's emergency operations manager.

## FEAR GRIPS AREA

Not everything went smoothly that day. Despite official warnings to stay back, hundreds of gawkers flocked to the shore to watch the waves come in. At the same time, hundreds of Spanish-speaking residents fled for the hills.

Like something out of a Hollywood disaster epic, Highway 17, Hecker Pass and parts of roads leading to UCSC were completely jammed. The Summit on top of Highway 17 was a parking lot, as whole families pulled off the road and rested on the hoods of cars, waiting for a killer wave than never arrived.

Horvat said the problem was traced to Spanish-language radio, which used an erroneous news broadcast out of Los Angeles. What had been put out as an alert for a 1.8-meter tsunami event somehow lost a decimal, and became an 18-meter monster. Word of mouth did the rest.

"What we got out was accurate," Horvat said. "Whoever got it didn't read it properly. One guy really can screw this up."

County public health officials also had to work hard to convince people that the disaster posed no nuclear threat, but that didn't stop people from snapping up iodide from

local drug stores.

After the tsunami, there was speculation that the harbor's narrow shape helped intensify the damage. Similar damage was seen at a narrow harbor in Crescent City, but two other harbors on Monterey Bay suffered almost no damage.

Ekers said mitigation measures, including a series of locks, were explored but that they turned out to be impractical.

A series of buoys that were instrumental in alerting local officials about the tsunami threat are also facing a proposed federal funding cut, a situation that has not been resolved.

There is one noticeable change around the harbor, though. Tsunami warning signs are going up — first around the harbor, and then near the rest of the county's beaches — alerting people to evacuation routes. They also help outline a tsunami hazard zone, which is based on a worst-case scenario.

"I think folks who live here

know where to go," Horvat said. "But we've got a lot of tourists and visitors from out of town who may not."

On a recent day, however, things seemed to have returned to normal. You could sit down for lunch on the deck at Aldo's, rent a stand-up paddleboard or take sailing lessons without a hint that a year ago, chaos reigned.

"It's still a very active and vibrant facility," Ekers said. "There's always something to do at the harbor."

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## HAIFLEY

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the boats.

Then, looking out my office window, I saw a terrifying sight: Water was being sucked rapidly south through the harbor channel out to sea, exposing bottom sand under the west jetty before a surge rushed toward the back end of the harbor. This was repeated many times in varying forms as surging waters carried boats, pieces of docks, kayak paddles, and a motorized watercraft or two, among other things.

Unlike an earthquake, the tsunami lasted many hours, its destruction repeated again and again. Thankfully, the biggest surge came less than two hours after low tide, averting a flood of surrounding land. Lisa Ekers and the harbor staff did miracles on that day, and over the days that followed it. And so did others who came to help.

Harbor losses are estimated at \$17 million, and climbing. This is just the latest in a string of setbacks for a place that was built to provide safe harbor to

mariners and a gateway for those who yearn to get on the water.

The financial setbacks started with a steady loss of tax funding beginning in the 1990s. Today the harbor is supported almost entirely through fees from docked boats, leases from buildings and percentages from harbor businesses. The loss of revenue from less productive salmon seasons in years past has hurt, and the recession has hit many harbor businesses hard.

It has also historically been difficult for harbor backers to rally public support for it. There is a popular image of the harbor as being exclusive. Yet, it is integrated deeply into our community.

Ocean science research uses boats that transit there. Education organizations, such as the Sea Scouts and O'Neill Sea Odyssey, can really only operate in a harbor. Though it has fallen on harder times, Santa Cruz's fishing industry continues to be a vital part of Santa Cruz's economy, culture and history.

Former Port District Director Brian Foss once said Santa Cruz is a maritime community.

Though few have actually been to the harbor, we wouldn't be who we are without it.

We have a need to connect with the sea. That's what the harbor provides. Even if you do not own a boat, there are many ways to get out onto the water, and most can be found at the harbor. If you don't want to get out on the water, the harbor has a lot to provide including interpretive displays, walking trails, volleyball and a busy outdoor scene.

The shock at the devastation has given way to sadness for some. But there is also opportunity. Consider supporting the many businesses, nonprofits and individuals there. There are restaurants, whale watching charters, fishing trips, kayak trips, professional services, boating and fishing gear, and more. And, next time you hear that the harbor needs support, please consider answering the call.

You can learn more about your harbor at [www.santacruzharbor.org](http://www.santacruzharbor.org).

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*Dan Haifley is executive director of O'Neill Sea Odyssey. He can be reached at [dhaifley@oneillseaodyssey.org](mailto:dhaifley@oneillseaodyssey.org).*