Tsuanmi Experts Talk Safety, Preparedness

Wednesday, 19 February 2014

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

Next month marks the 50th anniversary of the 1964 earthquake and tsunami that devastated much of Alaska’s coastline, including Kodiak. In the half century since that fateful Good Friday, communities across the state have been working to make sure they are prepared for similar emergency situations.

Last week a handful of emergency management and tsunami specialists hosted a two-and-a-half day training in Kodiak and helped prepare local officials for what to do in the event of any emergency, but specifically for tsunamis.

Cindi Preller is a tsunami program manager for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Weather Service. She said the training was great for community officials that will have decision making or action responsibilities during an emergency event, but stressed the importance of everyone knowing the warning signs of tsunamis and how to react on their own.

“And the most important one is if you feel an earthquake and the shaking sustains for longer than 20 seconds and you’re next to the water you really do need to evacuate. And that can be tough in a big earthquake that’s still shaking and quite dangerous. But what we’ve learned in the last few years is you really only might have a couple minutes. I mean we used to think you have 20, and now it’s down to two. So 20 seconds is roughly equivalent to a magnitude 7.0, and that’s strong enough to trigger a landslide.”

Preller said ducking and covering to protect your head and neck is the smartest thing to do in an earthquake, but she stressed the need for evacuation, too.

“If you’re next to the water then I’m asking you to evacuate during an earthquake. Yeah, you need to protect your head, your neck. It’s really good to sit down with your family and your coworkers and think that out ahead of time.”

Ervin Petty is an emergency management specialist with the Division of Homeland Security and said folks can find a lot of useful preparation and planning tips online through various state and national websites.

“The timing is perfect here for you. Next month on March 27 we’re going to do another Great Alaska Shake Out on March 27 at 1:26 p.m. We’ve done one recently in October, along with the west coast and a lot of other states around the country. But we’re doing this one with the 50th anniversary date of the big earthquake.”

Sam Albanese is the warning coordination meteorologist for the National Weather Service and said a helpful tool during times of

emergency is the Emergency Alert System, or EAS.

“And that’s one of the things that we do, and we do have a local office here in Kodiak that would be activating the EAS system if it’s an earthquake that we’re expecting a tsunami to be generated from. So that’s another way for people to be aware of what’s going on so they can get notification.”

Albanese said EAS messages are transmitted over the radio, and are also aired on NOAA weather radios. The Coast Guard will also broadcast any tsunami messages over the marine band.

In general, all three agree that it’s better to talk and plan for an emergency now, so that things can flow as smoothly as possible when an event actually occurs.