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July 26, 2011

The Honorable John L. Hayes  
Assistant Administrator  
National Weather Service  
Silver Spring Metro Center 2  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Mr. Hayes:

I would like to draw your attention to a recent article in the Homer News, which I have attached for your review. It highlights a problem that I respectfully request your assistance in resolving.

As you know, on March 11, 2011, an earthquake struck near the coast of Honshu, Japan at a magnitude of 9.0, which triggered a devastating tsunami. In turn, the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center issued a warning for the Aleutian Islands. Unfortunately, the tsunami warning sirens also sounded in Homer, despite there being no danger on the Kenai Peninsula.

I understand that the National Weather Service may be requiring sirens to go off in every coastal city when there is a tsunami warning, regardless of location. If this is true, is this absolutely necessary or is there a more effective strategy that can be utilized? I am concerned that if the sirens go off when there is no threat, we reduce the effectiveness of this vital warning system. The threat of a tsunami is very real to coastal Alaska as evidenced by the earthquake of 1964, in which corresponding tsunamis and post-quake tsunamis severely affected the communities of Valdez, Chenega, Whittier, Seward, and Kodiak, among others.

Thank you in advance for looking into this issue and for your service.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski  
U.S. Senator

## **False tsunami alert could be disastrous in real emergency**

### *Editorial*

We all know the Aesop's Fable about the boy who cried wolf. A shepherd boy lied so often about wolves attacking the flock that when an actual wolf appeared, no one believed him. That's the situation that unfortunately could develop if the Kenai Peninsula Borough's All-hazard Alert Broadcast system — the tsunami warning sirens — doesn't get fixed.

Twice this year the sirens have gone off in Homer when no actual tsunami threatened Kachemak Bay and lower Cook Inlet. In March the sirens sounded when the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center issued a warning for the Aleutian Islands, but not the rest of the state. Because the plan between the state and the National Weather Service and its National Weather Radio alert system stipulates that a warning goes out statewide even if an area doesn't need a warning, sirens go off in every coastal Alaska city.

Last week, the situation got worse. Even though the tsunami warning center issued a tsunami warning — again, for the Aleutian Islands only — the National Weather Radio didn't send a tone, triggering the Emergency Alert System and the sirens. When the warning center canceled the tsunami warning about an hour later, for some reason the National Weather Radio then sent out the EAS tone.

As Ricky Ricardo on the "I Love Lucy" TV show said, "Someone's got some 'splaining to do."

The problem isn't with the tsunami warning sirens. They worked. People heeded the message. Residents and visitors evacuated the Homer Spit and other low-lying areas — just as they should have.

The problem is with how those sirens go off. Emergency management officials have said getting the alert tone to go off regionally could be done, but at the risk that some villages won't get the alert. Better to send an alert out to every village, even if some towns don't need it, they say.

Perhaps, but too many false alerts and people will stop paying attention — and that would be disastrous in a real emergency. Alaska has more coastline than all the other states combined. The alert system needs to be fine tuned to take that into account. What's wrong with the system are programming and technology problems, which are imminently fixable. If it takes tax dollars to make it happen, that's money well spent.

The bright side to last week's false alarm is that the Kenai Peninsula Borough's Office of Emergency Management, Homer Police and the Homer Volunteer Fire Department did their jobs right. OEM Director Eric Mohrmann went to his office after he got the tsunami warning center alert, sent by email to his smart phone. Mohrmann called local officials and found out the alert hadn't gone off. He got updates from the tsunami warning center, including the notice the warning had been canceled. His office told police and fire about the tsunami warning cancellation. When the false alert came about, police knew it was wrong and worked to calm unnecessary fears. Updates were put out via radio and newspaper websites as information became available.

The business of emergency management isn't simple. It requires federal, state, borough and local agencies work together to protect the public. Sometimes it requires agencies to err on the side of redundancy, using both high-tech and simple tools.

But crying wolf hampers all future efforts to protect the public in case of an emergency. For that reason, the system needs to be fixed before it's needed for real.

Twice now we've been fooled into a tsunami scare that proved unnecessary. More large quakes will happen. While we hope that Homer never again hears those sirens go off except for a test, if they do sound, residents and visitors need to know they should take the warning seriously and do as instructed.

While emergency officials work to make sure the tsunami alert works properly, the rest of us have a responsibility to have our personal disaster plan in place. Do all members of our family know what the tsunami evacuation route is? Do we have emergency supplies in our homes and cars? If we're separated from family members in an emergency, do we have a plan to reconnect?

To add to one of Benjamin Franklin's sayings: An ounce of prevention not only is worth a pound of cure, but it will help stave off tons of panic when disaster strikes. Are you ready?