

Tsunami Report

South Kohala July 29, 2025

The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a Tsunami Warning for the State of Hawaii at 2:43 p.m. on July 29 due to an 8.7 magnitude earthquake off the east coast of Kamchatka, Russia.

“For the most part, we achieved most of our goals,” Hawai‘i County Mayor Kimo Alameda said. “We got everyone out of the coastal areas by 6:15 p.m., which was great.”

The first warning alert was issued at around 4:10 p.m. Following the alert, many people headed for higher ground, resulting in gridlock traffic. Ellison Onizuka Kona International Airport had 34 flight delays and cancellations. It was reported that many newly arrived tourists were stranded due to not being able to rent a car and ground traffic being diverted away from the airport. If tourists were able to get out of the airport, they found that they were not able to get to their likely accommodations due to closures mostly being in the affected tsunami zone.

A full tsunami evacuation is a rare event in Hawai‘i County and all county agencies worked together and got everyone to safety as needed,” Hawai‘i Island Acting Police Chief Reed Mahuna said. Before the first waves of the tsunami were expected to hit at 7:17 p.m. on Tuesday, most motorists were out of the possible impact zones.

The Waikoloa area resorts do not usually do a full evacuation and have their own emergency plans and actions planned and practiced. They tend to shelter in place as their facilities have multiple floors for higher elevation, stocked provisions, and structures that are earthquake graded and fortified for severe weather for the most part. However, as the full evacuation to higher ground was mandatory, getting all the guests and staff out all at one time using limited evacuation routes, was the main reason for the traffic issues.

Confusion arose as Waikoloa Village was the closest high ground. Although Civil Defense did not designate a location in the village, many assumed that there would be one and headed on to reach the evacuation location. Waikoloa Village doesn’t have a community center and the default location for any large activities is the school. Of note, the school does not have air conditioning. Police directing traffic were uncertain to direct people at the school but because of the amount of people looking for shelter, the school soon found themselves with people at their doors.

The principal, Michelle Barber, consulted with education officials and decided to open the doors for evacuees. Approximately 400 individuals came and stayed. Bathroom facilities needed to be open and the staff attempted to make the evacuees as comfortable as possible.

Many others who were displaced stayed at the shopping centers in Waikoloa and Waimea. Bathroom facilities were at capacity. The shopping center parking lots were also at capacity as people waited for the “all clear.” As the night went on and the danger seemingly passed, without the official “all clear,” crowds of people used their own judgement and left to return to their own accommodations.

In addition to the unofficial shelter in Waikoloa, several locations other than the only officially designated shelter in South Kohala - Waimea Community Center, several locations opened their doors included Hawai‘i Preparatory Academy, Parker School, Mana Christian ‘Ohana, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We even had a few families that were accommodated by a new housing development - Waikoloa Lofts. Many of those in the unofficial shelters stayed for hours, with some staying overnight. Those hosting, attempted to accommodate to the best of their abilities.

Much of the additional accommodating of evacuees was due to quick actions of local community members and existing networking between organizations. The Waimea Community Center found themselves over capacity (90) and thus the community stepped in.

We’d like to thank Patty Cook, Mark Noetzel, Trent Arnow, Kawena Gomes, Stephen Dunn, Michelle Barber, Tamara Garay, Chessine Nugent and many other community members and organizations who contributed their time and efforts in order to assist in the time of need.

Additionally we don’t have any accounting of private homes that may have assisted with those affected but suspect that that may have occurred.

In all, approximately 880 individuals, made up of mostly couples and families were accommodated in the South Kohala area of Waikoloa and Waimea during the tsunami emergency.

In speaking with several of those who had opened up their facilities, there were some suggestions and/or requests in preparing for future evacuations/emergencies.

Requests:

- Civil Defense dedicated and direct communications lines between shelters & Civil Defense. Suggestion was to set up a CrisisGo group (application) to be set up by Civil Defense.
- Food/Water emergency storage that could be accessed by shelters. Suggestion was to ask for centralized locations in Waimea and Waikoloa for supplies to help with immediate distribution.
- Blankets/Pillows/Toiletries/Sleeping mats stored for shelter use. Suggestion was to ask resorts for supplies that are slated for retirement. Storage for these supplies to be handled/stored by individual location and CERT storage facilities.
- Staggered evacuations should the need arise for full evacuations from the resorts to assist with traffic.
- Direct information given to traffic officers concerning evacuation locations and “all clear” notifications.
- CERT activation for any and all evacuations/emergencies allowing for practice and real life experience.
- Guests and visitors who were caught without accommodations experienced high anxiety due to not being able to get to their planned accommodations. Alerts specifically for them using the emergency alert system would help to calm and direct them to specific shelters/directions.

As we became more and more aware of the extent of assistance that the community did and how they rose to the occasion, it became clear that there are many existing resources that can be tapped if only to be asked.

I started asking organizations and facilities in Waimea mostly, and Waikoloa and found that at minimum close to 3,000 can possibly be accommodated should the need arise in emergency locations. I have included a spreadsheet of possible evacuation resources. This will need to be updated periodically. These are some of the more obvious places but there are potentially others.

It's obvious that Waimea has a stronger pool of resources than Waikoloa. I would recommend that the county reevaluate the need to expand on the Waimea District Park with another community building and instead work to have a community center in Waikoloa be built to accommodate the fast growing community there.