

Tsunami Siren System Could Have Saved More Lives

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A senior meteorologist at the National Weather Service (NWS), in an exclusive interview with AccuWeather.com, said more could have been done to warn people of the approaching tsunami that killed at least 150 people in the South Pacific.

Rescue and recovery efforts are underway in Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga following the tsunami caused by an 8.0-magnitude earthquake that hit about 7.48 a.m. local time.



Devastation on a hillside in Pago, American Samoa after tsunami waves swept ashore early Tuesday Sept. 29, 2009. A powerful Pacific Ocean earthquake spawned towering tsunami waves that swept ashore on Samoa and American Samoa, flooding and flattening villages. (AP Photo/Ardie Roque)

Akapo Akapo of the NWS in PagoPago, American Samoa said the tsunami warning came after the wave surges hit the island. He added that a siren system could have saved lives in the United States territory.

"We do need a siren. If we had a siren, we probably would have saved most of the people who had died because of the tsunami," he said to AccuWeather.com's Raychel Harvey-Jones.

Akapo said the American Samoa has a volcanic and mountainous landscape, which enables people to climb to higher ground to escape any flooding.

"Almost everywhere around American Samoa, you have people living on the ocean, and then right behind there a few yards or a few feet up, there's a mountain behind you; there's a hill you can climb up to," he said.

The 8.0-magnitude quake that hit south of the islands early Tuesday afternoon EDT caused four tsunami waves that hit the islands within minutes. The wave height was about 5.1 feet, and water reached as far as a mile inland.

"There was no time...when the earthquake occurred, it took only 15 minutes from the time when the earthquake hit and the time when the tsunami reached our islands," Akapo said. "It was so fast that [it was] very difficult to evacuate."

Tsunami sirens are in place on the mainland United States, Alaska and Hawaii to warn of approaching wave surges. American Samoa is an unincorporated territory of the United States, and most of the territory's villages and communities are near the coastline.

"Sirens have proven themselves, time and time again, to be invaluable tools for short-term warning of tornadoes, tsunamis, flash floods and wild fires," said Mike Smith, CEO of Weather Data, a AccuWeather.com company and private weather service in Wichita, Kan. that specializes in warnings of extreme weather. "Academic studies have shown the public appreciates the added safety sirens provide."

Smith added that the approximate cost of protecting the populated areas of American Samoa would be around \$100,000.

"In the United States, a comparable warning for tornadoes 15 minutes in advance activates the sirens, which gives people plenty of time to seek safety," said AccuWeather.com Expert Senior Meteorologist Henry Margusity.