

House Science Committee Holds Hearing on Tsunami Risk 2/2/05

A panel of expert witnesses, including the top U.S. officials directly responsible for tsunami prediction and preparedness, told the House Science Committee today that the U.S. is vulnerable to a major tsunami and that current detection and prediction capabilities are inadequate.

Witnesses cited limited detection capabilities in the Pacific Ocean and essentially no such capabilities in the Atlantic Ocean or the Caribbean Sea. "The Administration is to be applauded for coming forward quickly with a cogent, targeted and affordable proposal to improve tsunami detection for the U.S. and for its commitment to improve tsunami detection internationally," said Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY). "But detection is only one piece of the kind of comprehensive effort that is needed to reduce vulnerability to tsunamis. Warning systems, education, research and development, land-use planning, and ecosystem protection are all necessary if any program is to be effective."

Members at the hearing repeatedly pressed the Administration witnesses on whether education would be adequately addressed by the proposal, particularly since the West Coast could be struck by a tsunami generated so close to shore that the wave would hit before detectors could provide any warning.

Dr. Charles "Chip" Groat, Director of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), told the Committee that there is a 10-14 percent chance that the Oregon coast will be hit by a tsunami comparable in size to the one that recently hit South Asia within the next 50 years.

Discussing the frequency with which tsunamis occur, Brigadier General David L. Johnson (ret.), Assistant Administrator of the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Director of the National Weather Service (NWS), said that between 1900 and 2004, 923 tsunamis struck the Pacific Ocean, 120 of which caused casualties and damage. More information is available at the House Science Committee website at <http://www.house.gov/science>

This weekly report is written by the American Society of Civil Engineers' Government Relations staff. If you have any questions or comments about any items in this report please email govwash@asce.org.