

Question on Notice
No. 627
Asked on 18 April 2007

MR WETTENHALL asked the Premier and Minister for Trade (MR BEATTIE) -

QUESTION:

With reference to the recent tsunami alert—

- (1) How did Queensland Government agencies respond?
- (2) What lessons have been learned and what steps need to be taken at all levels of government to safeguard Queenslanders, particularly those that live and work in low-lying coastal areas, from the risks of tsunami and storm surge?

ANSWER:

(1) On 2 April 2007 at 6.40am Australian Eastern Standard Time, an undersea earthquake occurred near the Solomon Islands with a magnitude of 8.1 on the Richter Scale.

At 7.20am, a tsunami bulletin was issued by the Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology advising of a possible tsunami threat to Willis and Barrier Reef islands following the undersea earthquake. The bulletin was distributed electronically to a range of recipients, including local governments and the Queensland Department of Emergency Services' regional offices.

At the time this first warning was issued, we were unaware of the extent of the threat. I was unable to obtain any informed or accurate advice on the likely amplitude of wave action and its likely impact before the tsunami effect was felt on our coastline. Knowing the potential destructive force of a tsunami, and after what happened in Asia, I took the view that it was better to be overcautious and over-prepared.

Queensland's State Disaster Management Group Duty Officer relayed the Bureau of Meteorology advice to key personnel in the Queensland Disaster Management System which is a network of disaster management groups and coordination centres, at state, regional and local level, that activates quickly to assist communities respond to any hazard.

By 7.35am, the State Disaster Coordination Centre was activated in preparation for a possible tsunami. Local and district disaster management groups were also activated to ensure appropriate local arrangements were in place and the Queensland Police Service also activated its Major Incident Room in Brisbane.

At approximately 8.30am, I convened a meeting of key Ministers, the Police Commissioner and departmental representatives to discuss issues concerning Queensland's preparedness and response. During the meeting I contacted the Prime Minister to discuss the Australian Government's response. In addition, I spoke to the Mayor of Cooktown to ensure that all preparations necessary were occurring on the ground.

As per the national protocol, public warnings were issued via the Bureau of Meteorology's website and through the media, with television and radio stations advised to use the Standard Emergency Warning Signal to alert the community to the threat.

Queensland Government media releases urged North Queensland residents to take safety precautions and residents were advised to listen to the radio for updates, stay away from beaches and prepare for evacuations if advised by authorities.

A State teleconference was held with Emergency Services regional staff to ensure continuity of regional emergency operations. The State Disaster Coordination Group met and was briefed on the situation and a Queensland Government 1800 telephone number was established by Smart Services Queensland to deal with public enquiries.

The Bureau of Meteorology later issued advice that the threat had largely eased. Queensland was fortunate to suffer no impact from the tsunami, and no further emergency management actions were necessary. There is little doubt, however, that in different circumstances the consequences could have been catastrophic. It is incumbent on everyone charged with the responsibility of protecting coastal communities to review the level of preparedness for such event.

Immediately following the event, I directed the State Disaster Management Group to conduct a thorough review.

(2) In addition to the review conducted by the State Disaster Management Group immediately following the tsunami threat of 2 April 2007, a range of operational debriefs have been completed by the Department of Emergency Services and other departments.

While it is clear from these reviews that State agencies mobilised as quickly as possible to assist vulnerable communities to prepare themselves for the impact of a tsunami, time is of the essence if lives are to be saved. The events of 2 April clearly show the need for a better early warning system.

It has reinforced the importance of the Australian Tsunami Warning System project. This project will deliver technologically advanced detection systems, faster and better warnings and tsunami information for the community and emergency managers, and help refine planning and community response capacity for this hazard. I have written to the Prime Minister urging him to take whatever steps he can to accelerate this project.

A key outcome of the recent meeting of the Council for the Australian Federation on 12 April 2007 was an agreement to ask the Commonwealth to share information on optimum systems and processes that enable the rapid and reliable communication of tsunami warning information to affected communities on a 24/7 basis. This is a key initiative that I have personally raised with the Prime Minister and will continue to advocate for with the Australian Government. In the meantime, the Queensland Government is investigating a number of interim measures to advise the community quickly of potential risks and emergencies.

We also need to do more at all levels of government to up-date and refine our modelling of communities at risk of tsunami or storm surges. This will also allow for better planning and responses in the future.

My Government will continue to work with other jurisdictions across Australia to improve our preparedness and learn from each other's experiences. Through correspondence with my colleagues in other States and Territories, and discussions in the Council of the Australian Federation, I have sought to encourage a close working relationship in developing a common, nationally consistent approach to responding to events such as this that may occur in the future.

Our priority is to continue to pressure the Commonwealth to deliver the vital early warning system to Queensland as soon as possible.