

Tsunami preparedness & planning in Australia – The road since 2004

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Since the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that devastated Aceh and resulted in the loss of over 200,000 lives, the Australian Government has been working with State Emergency Authorities and Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) to better prepare the Australian community for a similar event should it occur.

SLSA is Australia's major water safety and rescue authority and is the largest volunteer organisations of its kind in the country. At a national and state level over 140,000 members involved in 420 surf life saving services, including around 40,000 active patrolling lifesavers and 900 paid lifeguards (1).

As a member of the Australian Tsunami Working Group (ATWG), SLSA has developed policies and procedures for its services and educational resources to better inform its members, employees and the general public about the risk of tsunami and addressing the elements of the 'drowning chain'(2). These factors include:

1. Lack of knowledge, disregard or misjudgment of the hazard;
2. Uninformed, unprotected or unrestricted access to the hazard;
3. Lack of supervision or surveillance;
4. An inability to cope once in difficulty.

SLSA has integrated itself into early warning systems and emergency management plans due to the proximity of its operations to potentially affected areas. Lifesaving services on the coast have the ability to save critical time through monitoring, surveillance, the evacuation of coastal users, the relocation of lifesaving equipment and resources for recovery following tsunami impact if required.

With Australian Government assistance, SLSA has also developed an educational resource regarding tsunami including information about the potential hazard, how tsunami work, how they are caused and Australian case studies including the Aceh event abovementioned. The resources also includes details about the warning framework, what the different levels of warning mean and what the role of SLSA has in responding through each stage of warning and threat.

Distribution of emergency management plan information to SLS and other lifesaving services is ongoing and education of members and the public is continuing through promotion of the resource which is now available online at www.beachsafe.org.au. Once the ISO standard is finalised, SLSA will also be working with authorities to introduce appropriate signage on the coast through its coastal risk management processes.

References:

1. 2009 National Coastal Safety Report, Surf Life Saving Australia, Sydney, Australia 2009
2. ILS Drowning Prevention Strategies, International Lifesaving Federation, Leuven, Belgium 2008

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