White House proposes to cut tsunami warning system

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Orcutt said NOAA should trim from other areas, such as its satellite programs that are behind schedule. Meanwhile, critics are sounding the alarm.

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measure water pressure changes and seafloor movement, and send instant details about tsunamis to satellites. The data is used by NOAA's tsunami warning centers in Honolulu and Alaska to fine-tune tsunami alerts.

On March 11, after the magnitude 9.0 earthquake off Japan, the buoys helped provide precise predictions -- to the centimeter -- of the size of the waves, along with direction and arrival time on the West Coast. Because of the data, areas were evacuated, including the Santa Cruz waterfront.

Today, however, 10 of the 39 buoys are inoperable, and that number could climb if $1 million is cut from the $11 million annual budget to operate the buoy system. NOAA says it will strive to keep no more than 11 out of service at a time.

Jane Hollingsworth, NOAA's tsunami program manager, said that because many of the buoys are in remote locations such as the South Pacific and rugged Alaskan coast, NOAA is looking to conserve resources by working with Australia, Russia and Japan to maintain and repair U.S. buoys.

She said seismic instruments first alert scientists to the risk of a tsunami.

"The initial warning is based on seismic data, which has nothing to do with these buoys," she said.

Yet, NOAA leaders have said in the past that the buoys, known as DART -- for Deep-Ocean Assessment and Reporting of Tsunamis -- are vital.

"The DART network serves as the cornerstone to the U.S. tsunami warning system," NOAA said in a March 2008 news release.
A 2009 research paper by NOAA scientists Luijun Chang, Chris Chamberlain and Vasily Titov said the buoys are NOAA's "primary source" of information for tsunami warning and forecast because, unlike seismic data or computer models, the buoys provide direct measurement and confirmation of tsunami waves.

After the 2004 tsunami that devastated Indonesia and other countries -- killing more people than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs combined -- Congress passed a law in 2006 to increase funding for tsunami buoys, research and preparedness. But that funding, $40 million a year for seven years, runs out Oct. 1. Although some reports say Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, may be working to reauthorize the law, no new bill has been introduced.

In recent years, California received about $1 million a year of the outreach money. The money paid for computer models showing how far inland waves could go, emergency drills, 3,200 warning signs from San Diego to Oregon and other materials. If Congress approves the Obama proposal, it would reduce the outreach program's current national budget from about $10 million to $6 million.

But more drills, evacuation plans and computer maps are needed, said Jim Goltz, the earthquake and tsunami manager for the California Emergency Management Agency from 2007 until December.

"Preparedness and public education is perishable," Goltz said. "People need to be reminded. It's just like earthquakes."

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