

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105220](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

As the principal federal agency responsible for maritime search and rescue, Coast Guard deploys personnel across the United States. This includes deployments to 39 coastal units in the Pacific Northwest.

The Pacific Northwest is also home to seismic hazards, including the Cascadia Subduction Zone. This is a large fault 50-100 miles offshore known to produce large earthquakes and tsunamis that may necessitate the evacuation of Coast Guard personnel and dependents during a major event.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 provides for GAO to study Coast Guard efforts to plan for the evacuation of its personnel and dependents during a major Cascadia Subduction Zone event. This report addresses, among other things, the extent to which the Coast Guard developed tsunami evacuation plans and procedures for its personnel and dependents in the Pacific Northwest.

GAO reviewed Coast Guard guidance and policies; reviewed tsunami evacuation plans for 39 coastal units; interviewed Coast Guard officials from headquarters and 10 field units; and interviewed other federal, state, and local officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that Coast Guard ensure that coastal units in the Pacific Northwest develop and exercise tsunami evacuation plans for personnel and dependents, and provide guidance to assist units with planning efforts. DHS concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105220](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or MacLeodH@gao.gov.

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COAST GUARD

Additional Actions Needed to Improve Tsunami Emergency Planning in the Pacific Northwest

What GAO Found

Among the 39 U.S. Coast Guard units on the Pacific Northwest coast, 19 had a written tsunami evacuation plan for unit personnel. Coast Guard does not ensure units in this seismically active region of the United States create tsunami evacuation plans. Rather, each unit's leadership determines whether to develop a plan. By ensuring coastal units in the Pacific Northwest develop evacuation plans, Coast Guard would have greater assurance that unit personnel are aware of local tsunami risks and are prepared to evacuate during a major tsunami event.

Coast Guard also does not provide guidance to units that create evacuation plans. As a result, the content of these written plans—where they exist—varies. For example, four of these 19 plans included a map or diagram with evacuation route information, and three included evacuation protocols for dependents. By providing tsunami evacuation planning guidance to its coastal units within the Pacific Northwest, Coast Guard could better ensure that unit-developed plans provide location-specific evacuation protocols for Coast Guard personnel and their dependents.

Leadership at the units GAO visited that had written tsunami evacuation plans did not know the feasibility of their plans because they had not exercised them due, in part, to the impact of COVID-19 on in-person gatherings. Further, officials were unaware of past attempts to exercise their unit's plan or the frequency, results, and lessons learned from exercises. These officials stated that personnel with such knowledge had rotated to new units—action which typically occurs every 3 to 4 years. By exercising tsunami evacuation plans, unit personnel would be better positioned to assess plan feasibility and make adjustments as needed.

Tsunami Evacuation Sign



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