



Waves pound Santa Cruz County

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A spectator near Lighthouse Point takes a selfie as massive waves come crashing into the coast Thursday. (Aric Sleeper/Santa Cruz Sentinel)

SANTA CRUZ — Very high swell and surf conditions collided with high tide Thursday morning to unleash damaging waves along Santa Cruz County's coastline.



Corcoran Beach was swallowed whole Thursday morning as high tide and high swell combined to overtop East Cliff Drive. (Jessica A. York — Santa Cruz Sentinel)

The ocean's fury peaked with high tide at 10:30 a.m., a couple of hours after the previous day and night's rainstorm dwindled out. In its wake were left flooded roads and low-lying business areas, scattered ocean debris and significant beach erosion. The National Weather Service is [forecasting an encore performance Saturday](#), saying the high surf will subside Friday before another "large swell train" arrives in time for the weekend.

Peaking with high tide around 10:30 a.m. Thursday, the surf put on a dramatic show for the hundreds of people who gathered at prime viewing locations up and down the coast, from Steamer Lane in Santa Cruz to along the Stockton Avenue bridge in Capitola and beyond.



The Santa Cruz Wharf was evacuated and closed Thursday due to high surf, which barraged the structure with massive waves. (Aric Sleeper/Santa Cruz Sentinel)

In the morning, the city of Santa Cruz closed Main and Cowell beaches, with the Santa Cruz Fire Department Marine Safety Division rescuing some individuals living on Cowell Beach who were nearly trapped by the rising tide. Later, the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf was evacuated and its businesses closed for the day after at least 20-foot waves reached up beneath the structure and tore out wharf pilings, two sprinklers and appeared to damage a water main and sewer pipe, according to Marine Safety Capt. Brian Thomas.

“Due to the structural damage and we can’t pump any sewage out, we shut down the entire wharf,” Thomas said, shortly after 10 a.m. “Right now we just made the call to get PG&E out here to isolate the gas because the waves are coming up and hitting the gas main and we don’t want that to start free-flowing.”

Thomas aired concerns about wave watchers keeping a safe distance from the water while his division had less access to backup support. The Santa Cruz Harbor Patrol was locked inside the harbor during the dangerous conditions and the Coast Guard was unlikely to be able to quickly respond, he said. Ocean watchers up and down the coast repeatedly called on emergency responders throughout the day, seeking ocean rescues for surfers and swimmers who seemed to be struggling in the water. Few if any appeared to require intervention, however.



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- Capitola Police Department personnel survey flooding and related damages to the area around the Capitola Village businesses Thursday. (Jessica A. York -- Santa Cruz Sentinel)
- A wave set repeatedly pushes up against the bottom of the Capitola Wharf on Thursday morning. The damaged wharf remained closed and under repair from a series of damaging storms at the beginning of the year. (Jessica A. York -- Santa Cruz Sentinel)

- The combination of a high tide and large swell after a rainy night washed out East Cliff Drive at several locations, leaving mud and logs in its wake. A passing runner attempted to help a worker remove some of the debris Thursday morning at Moran Lake. (Jessica A. York -- Santa Cruz Sentinel)
- The sun rises Thursday behind the Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse at Lighthouse Point as early morning wave surges crash against the cliffs along West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz. (Jessica A. York -- Santa Cruz Sentinel)

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“We have some rescue skis that are going in the water to make contact with people attempting to surf right now,” Thomas said in the morning. “There’s about four people out there right now, trying. I haven’t seen anyone catch a wave. They’re trying. The conditions aren’t right for it now.”

The Santa Cruz County Office of Response, Recovery and Resilience issued a widespread emergency alert around 8 a.m., noting that the Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office had issued an evacuation warning and closed Seacliff State Beach and the Rio Del Mar Esplanade area. Later, warnings for Capitola were issued. The county also established a temporary evacuation point at New Brighton Middle School, 250 Washburn Ave. in Capitola. Evacuation warnings countywide were removed by 2:30 p.m.

Early in the day, Central Fire District and Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office deputies were out in Rio Del Mar, called to rescue a woman from her vehicle. Though uninjured, the woman was stranded by rising waters on Beach Drive shortly before 7 a.m. and was unable to exit her vehicle.

Low-lying areas of Seacliff and Capitola continue to show significant public and private impacts from major storms early this year; work is underway to repair a hole in the Capitola Wharf and Seacliff State Beach's pier has been removed entirely.

Once again, Capitola Village's Esplanade was inundated with floodwaters and businesses fronting Soquel Creek battled tidal surges Thursday. Business employees could be seen grabbing armfuls of sandbags to pile up outside their doors. The Capitola Venetian hotel was evacuated, while the rest of the low-lying Esplanade area was put on an evacuation warning.

"Public Works pushed up a sand berm and they put boards on the seawall that we normally open up in the summertime," Capitola Police Capt. Mike Kilroy said. "But this swell just came over the seawall. It didn't seem as violent as last year but it was just a steady surge of water."

Capitola Chief Andy Dally, just beginning to survey the storm damage Thursday, said he was grateful that the village had not faced simultaneous heavy rains along with the high tide and swell. In a statement issued Thursday afternoon, the chief urged residents and businesses to “stay tuned” for updates on the next significant wave event, set for Saturday morning. The department expected the Esplanade to reopen by Thursday evening, according to the statement.

East Cliff Drive from Santa Cruz to Pleasure Point was closed with muddy washouts at all three of its lagoons, including Schwan Lagoon, Corcoran Lagoon and Moran Lake. A crowd gathered near Sunny Cove traded challenges to each other over what waves they would be able to surf, though none were venturing out. At Corcoran Lagoon, a small group of young men egged each other into crossing the lake-like road and ended up dismounting their bicycles to push across the water.

The National Weather Service shared notice of a flood warning until 3 p.m. Thursday and a high surf warning stretching through 3 a.m. Friday.

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