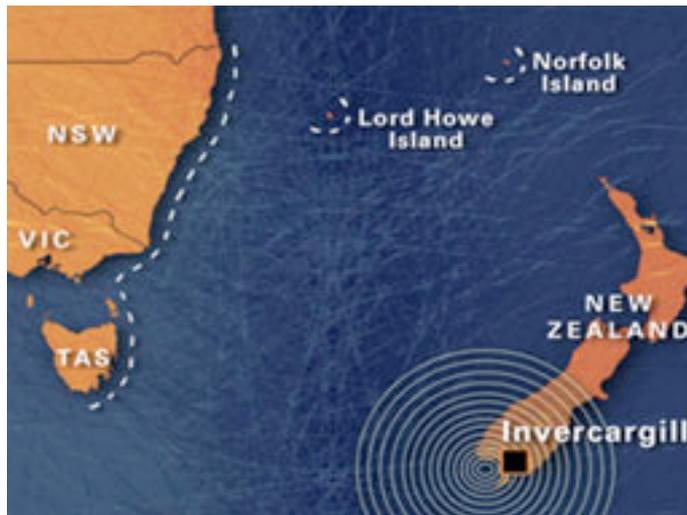


Tsunami warnings lifted for Australia

AAP July 16, 2009, 6:10 am

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- [Tsunami leaves SE coast unscathed](#) July 15, 2009, 10:05 pm
- [New Zealand quake sparks tsunami warnings](#) July 15, 2009, 10:06 pm
- [New Zealand quake sparks tsunami scare](#) July 15, 2009, 10:35 pm
- [Tsunami alert for Australia scaled back](#) July 15, 2009, 10:43 pm
- [New Zealand quake tsunami warnings cancelled](#) July 15, 2009, 11:12 pm

A powerful 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck off the southwest coast of New Zealand on Wednesday, seismologists said, prompting a brief tsunami warning but no casualties or major damage.

The epicentre of the undersea quake was located about 160km west of the city of Invercargill, on South Island, at a depth of about 35km, the US Geological Survey reported. It struck at 0922 GMT (1922 AEST)

In Australia, coastguards, police and fire services were all put on red alert as the potential danger to low-lying and coastal areas was assessed, but the warnings were later scaled back to the lesser "marine" version before all warnings were lifted at 1.30am (AEST) on Thursday.

The Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre said a low-level tsunami was generated near the epicentre, but later cancelled its warning, saying the waves no longer posed a threat to the whole country.

"Sea level readings confirm that a tsunami was generated. It may have been destructive along coasts near the earthquake epicentre," the centre said, but noted sea levels were only about 20 centimetres above normal.

New Zealand civil defence officials said they had issued only a "potential tsunami" warning for the Southland area.

Emergency management spokesman Vince Cholewa said initial reports indicated a wave about 17 centimetres in height reached the southern port of Bluff about an hour after the quake.

"We're just waiting on confirmation of that, and we will cancel the warning for a potential tsunami," he said.

New Zealand's Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences (GNS) upgraded its reading to 7.8 after initially measuring the quake at 6.6.

A 5.8-magnitude aftershock struck roughly 20 minutes after the initial quake, USGS said, with three more ranging between 5.0 and 5.3-magnitude over the following four hours.

Radio New Zealand said that residents hundreds of kilometres away from the epicentre reported items falling off shelves after the initial quake, but said there were no casualties or serious damage thus far.

One resident of Invercargill told the New Zealand Press Association that the first tremor lasted at least a minute.

"Things just started to rattle a bit, then the house started to sway," said the man, who added that he, his wife and their three young children huddled under the dining table until the quake subsided.

Cracks had appeared around several door frames in the house, he said.

Invercargill police Inspector Olaf Jensen said there were no immediate reports of damage in the city, but the quake was significant enough to send staff running into doorways for safety.

Earthquakes are frequent in New Zealand where the boundaries of continental plates meet causing earthquakes and volcanic activity.

Warnings issued by the Joint Australian Tsunami Warning Centre on Wednesday night said low-level tsunami waves were recorded off the NSW coast at Port Kembla on Wednesday night.

Despite the lifting of the warnings in Australia, the NSW State Emergency Service urged people to exercise caution near coastal areas between Gabo Island to Seal Rocks in case of strong currents.

"The public should be aware that although the main tsunami threat has passed, small unusual waves and currents and abnormal tides may still affect some beaches, harbours and coastal waterways for many hours or even days," a spokesman for the service said.