

Disaster in Paradise? Even the Sweetest Dreams Can Become Nightmares without Adequate Information and Preparation



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Date: Dec 28, 2007

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Have you ever dreamed of moving your business, (in mind or reality) to a place that encompasses earth's natural beauty? Today these dreams are closer than ever, since via the web, your office can be just about anywhere. Before you take the plunge, however, remember that volcanoes, floods and tornadoes, wildfires and other calamities may also play in your new backyard. If you take a proactive look at how to manage any potential disaster that comes your way you could indeed find paradise, both in home and career.



Figure 1 [Lahaina](#), on the island of Maui in Hawaii, October 2007

You already know that you're at risk if you live in California, right? Earthquake/wildfires, and the possibility of even a tsunami probably reside somewhere in your daily thoughts. The same can be said if you live in Australia, Hawaii, Mexico, or near Mount St. Helens in Washington state. You likely live and work in one of these places because you were enticed by the beauty that surrounds you.

No matter what the potential, as each day goes by with no calamities actually occurring, we all tend to become complacent. Your rational mind knows with a certainty that the day eventually *will* come when your world is turned upside down. Are you prepared? This three-part series will offer some very useful tips on how to assess the probability of a natural disaster, helpful information whether you live in Bali, Baghdad, or Brooklyn.

Assessing the Probability of a Disaster

One of the most difficult tasks that face the recovery planner is calculating the odds that a disaster will strike. As contingency planners, we try to stack the odds in our favor, in much the same way that a gambler is always on the alert for a "hot tip" from the racetrack before placing his bet. In our business, it's about information that information and what you do with it are your most valuable assets in times of disaster. Armed with the right information, you can make critical decisions on where to build your home or business, what type of materials to use, and escape or evacuation plans where needed.

An insurance company scrutinizes actuarial tables before underwriting a policy. The same kinds of tools are available to the contingency planner, if you know where to look. But what if a disaster happens where it has never happened before? Some disasters, such as major earthquakes and tsunamis, happen so infrequently that not a lot of data is available. Consider the possibility of an earthquake in California or Japan. It's a virtual certainty that one of these will happen in your lifetime. The [Great Kanto earthquake](#) in Japan in 1923 and the [San Francisco earthquake](#) in 1906 killed hundreds of thousands of people. Those earthquakes occurred early in the previous century; we were quite overdue for another. It has been so long, in fact, that it's guesswork at best to determine how modern infrastructure would stand up to a similar event today. New buildings are much stronger, designed with earthquakes in mind, but there are also a lot more people in major cities, which changes the whole equation for the contingency planner.

It's important to remember that disasters, although predictable in some cases, can occur in any form, anywhere, at any time. Where can you get much-needed real-time information? The state of Washington has not experienced a tsunami for awhile, but [tsunamis do happen there](#). Washington hasn't had a volcanic eruption for awhile, either,

look at [what happened in 1980](#).

When planning for these kinds of events, consider sources like the following

- The [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) (NOAA) provides valuable information to the general public about changes in climate
- On a global scale, consult the [Emergency Disasters Data Base](#) (EM-DAT).
- It may sound local, but the [Pacific Disaster Center](#) (PDC) in Kihei, on the Hawaiian island of Maui, gathers information from a wide variety of sources about potential disasters in the Asia Pacific area.

It's All About Getting GOOD Information

We'll discuss the Pacific Disaster Center (PDC) in particular because, by virtue of some personal contact, we know quite a bit about this organization. We spent some time at the PDC recently, finding a repository of knowledge that in many respects is unmatched anywhere.

First, a little background on the PDC. Although it has *Pacific* in its name, the Pacific Disaster Center operates in an area far beyond the Pacific Rim, such as Africa and Europe. The PDC was chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1995, after the 1992 Hurricane Iniki destroyed much of the Hawaiian island of Kauai. The PDC watches, learns, analyzes, and then models various disaster scenarios, bringing awareness into diverse communities. The PDC's hardcore scientific approach allows contingency planners to strengthen their case for presentation to policymakers, thereby enabling those who set policy to manage *proactively*—sometimes even preventing catastrophic disasters. Here's how the PDC's "2004-2005 Major Accomplishments" brochure describes the work of the organization:

"The ability of the Pacific Disaster Center (PDC) to quickly respond to emergency management requests for strategic maps, mitigation tools, online data, and information is a prime example of how our effective knowledge-sharing, applied information research, and analysis capabilities help support today's diverse global community."

Other than justifying a trip to Maui, which is pretty cool in and of itself, we found a lot of reasons to take an interest in the PDC. It's rare to find a "virgin" market in disaster recovery, but this might be one. In fact, we were impressed enough that our company, [b4Ci](#), actually partnered with the PDC, because the type of information offered has enormous value in the Fortune 1000 disaster recovery market. For example, if you ever wanted to see what the effect would be of an earthquake, tsunami, volcanic eruption, or other event on the assets of your organization, these guys can give you the best possible picture, both literal and informational.

The Pacific Disaster Center operates in concert with other federal and state agencies, [Hawaii State Civil Defense](#), and the [University of Hawaii](#). The PDC has earned the respect of the many other nations it has already aided through its risk assessments, detailed data reports, and field exercises. The modeling team of the PDC re-creates disaster scenarios so that you can "see" the disaster as it unfolds, demonstrating the full magnitude of the ultimate damage. This is compelling information for any organization.

Applying Sophisticated Disaster Modeling to the Fortune 1000 Space

We were shown one such computer model, of a tsunami hitting the coastal shores of a certain Pacific Island nation. The model was much more than a cartoon or animation. Using literally terabytes of information, the PDC was able to create a full-motion video projecting precisely what the event would *look like* and destroy, without the event actually happening. They substantiated the presentation with the most modern and robust underlying data. The result was compelling. In fact, it "sold" policymakers of that island nation, encouraging them to take prompt action. It seems that the parliament for this nation had its building in close proximity to the shoreline of the southern Pacific Ocean. This building was clearly visible in the PDC computer model. Then, whoosh-bang! It was gone.

The effect of the tsunami, illustrated pictorially, clearly conveyed to management the risks involved. In fact, if not for the elaborate model that showed the nation's parliament being totally obliterated by the tsunami, the prime minister might have taken his chances and kept the status quo, instead of moving the parliament building to a higher elevation. There's nothing like a good picture to tell a story.

Having the proper information in your hand is a powerful weapon. But the ability to communicate that information through a compelling and substantiated simulation is indispensable. This capability might be the "next new thing" in disaster recovery planning.

Other PDC Activities

The Pacific Disaster Center also supports communities and first responders in a variety of ways:

- Support of humanitarian organizations at every level
- Response teams that go out into the field
- Mock tabletop-disaster exercises
- Tsunami awareness
- First alert procedures
- Advanced computer modeling and probability analysis

Although the focus rests firmly on preserving human life and economic livelihood through preparation, education, and revitalization, the PDC also reaches out to many nations worldwide. The PDC works on-site with public officials in the public and private sectors, as well as with other experts worldwide, in determining infrastructure vulnerabilities, conducting planning workshops, and providing support. For instance, mock tabletop-disaster exercises and annual disaster drills help communities to work together by being freshly prepared to spring into action when disaster strikes. Drills are scheduled (some annually) utilizing "storm track maps, weather situational products, and wind damage estimates."

PDC response teams also go out into the field to survey the land, gather maps, and pool other relative information into terabytes of databases, in conjunction with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and other mapping tools. The PDC collaborates with the community to determine the preeminent path to developing disaster-mitigation planning. For example, if an earthquake wipes out a gambling casino and an electric power plant, each worth \$1 billion, in the eyes of an insurance adjuster the two buildings have essentially the same value. Obviously, however, the loss of the power plant has a far more devastating social and economic impact in the community. As a quasi-public agency, the PDC is one of the few resources that not only can gauge the effect of disasters in actuarial or monetary terms; it also can help with assessing the more nebulous social impact. (Each nation has its own economic capabilities that must be addressed when making these assessments, but you get the idea.)

Summary

Whether your home or business is in paradise or you would just like it to be, in the next two segments of this series you will pick up some useful information on how to gauge the probability of widespread disaster and its effect on your infrastructure and organization, as well as how to sound the alarm with management order to get your planned response accepted and funded. See you next month. In the meantime, good luck in your pursuits!

NOTE

Special thanks to our friends at the Pacific Disaster Center for their thoughtful contributions. And a big welcome to Sharon M. Wrobel (my wife of 32 years) for her contributions to this series and as coauthor on my book *Business Resumption Planning, Second Edition* (© 2007 Taylor Publishing Inc.)! We hope you will enjoy this "two for one" series.

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