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Community News

CHANNEL EARTHQUAKE CONCERNS INTO ACTION, SAY EXPERTS

CORVALLIS — A national news article suggesting that everything in Oregon west of Interstate-5 “would be toast” in a major Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake certainly drew attention to the seismic reality facing the Pacific Northwest.

The concern, though, is that people are focusing on the most draconian or extreme scenarios, experts say, which can lead to a sense of fatalism.

The reaction illustrates the state of earthquake and tsunami preparedness — or lack thereof — in the United States, said Patrick Corcoran, a Sea Grant education and outreach specialist at Oregon State University who works with coastal communities on disaster preparedness.

It’s a matter of feast or famine.

“The Cascadia Subduction Zone has shifted from a science project to a social studies project,” Corcoran said. “We need to find a sweet spot between fear and action. What I try to do is temper the tendency of people to toggle between the poles of ‘it won’t happen here’ and ‘it will be so bad that there’s no use worrying about it.’”

Oregon has been taking some of the first serious steps toward earthquake mitigation, said Scott Ashford, dean of OSU’s College of Engineering and chair of governor-appointed task force on preparation.

Recent legislation has resulted in a large increase in funding for K-12 and emergency facility seismic retro-fitting, as well as the creation of a new position — the state’s first Chief Resilience Officer.

Oregon is also working on some of the first tsunami build-

ing codes, which likely will be implemented over the next few years.

Oregon State University scientists have been warning Pacific Northwest citizens for more than a quarter of a century about the potential of a major earthquake in the Cascadia Subduction Zone.

The subduction of a tectonic plate beneath North America has the potential to trigger an earthquake ranging from magnitude 8.0, as happened in Chile in 2010, to 9.0 (or greater), which took place in Japan in 2011.

Scientists believe that a magnitude 9.0-plus earthquake, which Corcoran calls “the largest of the large,” would likely trigger a tsunami that could devastate coastal communities, while the earthquake could destroy infrastructure throughout western Oregon and Washington, including roads, bridges, water and sewer lines, and the power grid.

However, he added, the more probable scenario is an earthquake on “the average side of large,” where the damage is less. The best response isn’t necessarily to flee the region, Corcoran said, but to become pro-active in preparing for a disaster.

As residents in Japan, Nepal, Chile and other countries have done, Northwesters need to learn to live with the realistic threat of an earthquake and tsunami — not ignore the threat and hope they don’t happen.

The best approach, Corcoran says, is to prepare for the “most likely next event” — and that doesn’t necessarily mean the destruction of western Oregon as we know it.

“We don’t insist on the worst-case scenario with driving vehicles,” Corcoran said. “We don’t have a zero-tolerance for car fatalities. We try to do our best to identify and mitigate the risks, but we assume a great deal of risk. We don’t require that all cars be able to hit a brick wall at 100 miles per hour and have passengers unharmed. That’s impractical.”

“We need to consider a similar approach with earthquakes.”

Chris Goldfinger, a professor in OSU’s College of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences, and a leading expert on the Cascadia Subduction Zone, estimates that the chances of a major earthquake off the coast from northern California to just south of Astoria are about 24 percent in the next 50 years.

“South of Cape Blanco, Ore., the chances increase to about 37 percent,” he added.

Goldfinger said the furor in news reports and on social media about western Oregon becoming “toast” have been misconstrued.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has to prepare for a worst-case scenario as the starting point for its planning, he said, but that doesn’t mean that experts think western Oregon will be destroyed.

So, how big will the next Northwest earthquake be? No one knows.

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