

Officials sign Southern California earthquake plan into effect

Document is result of largest catastrophic planning effort in nation

Brenda Gazzar, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 12-15-10

PASADENA - Federal and state emergency management officials unveiled a plan on Tuesday to help prepare Southern California for a catastrophic, 7.8-magnitude earthquake that would kill up to 1,800 people.

The California Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency signed the plan into effect to help the region prepare for and respond to the "unthinkable" but likely scenario.

The Southern California Catastrophic Earthquake Plan - the product of nearly a two-year, \$2.4-million process involving more than 1,500 emergency management professionals - is the result of the largest catastrophic planning effort in the country, officials said.

"A no-notice event like a 7.8 (magnitude) earthquake is going to overwhelm government," said Matthew Bettenhausen, secretary of the California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA), after a signing ceremony at the Pasadena Convention Center. "We're working to deal with those issues, but we need the public's help ... It's not a matter of if a 7.8 (magnitude) earthquake is going to happen, it's when."

The "all-hazards plan" advances coordination between a variety of federal, state and local agencies, the non-profit sector, faith-based communities and others. It also clearly details the roles and responsibilities of each in a catastrophic incident.

The highly detailed plan is intended to account for "every walk of society," including those with special needs and pets, officials said.

"This has set the standard of how we can do very strong planning (for catastrophes) and teamwork building and take this effort around the country," said Justin Dombrowski, a FEMA response division director for Region 9, which includes California.

Members of the public have a responsibility to create an action plan for themselves, their family members and pets, including having enough clean water, food, medicine and other emergency supplies for each for a minimum of three days, Bettenhausen said.

Barely half of Americans have set supplies aside for a disaster and an even smaller number have a disaster emergency plan in place to be self-sufficient for at least 72 hours afterward, according to the agencies.

The plan used lessons learned from the Golden Guardian 2008 disaster drill, which envisioned a 7.8-magnitude earthquake emanating along the southernmost segment of the San Andreas Fault, starting at the Salton Sea and heading toward Los Angeles.

A quake of that magnitude could result in some 1,800 deaths in Southern California, more than 50,000 injuries, one in 16 buildings being significantly damaged, and about 1,600 fires in the region that require fire department response, according to the agencies.

Basic services such as transportation, health care, water, power and communications would be significantly disrupted.

"Not only are the odds of it happening great, it's almost 90 percent that we'd have that kind of earthquake within the next 30 years," Bettenhausen said. "This has happened in California before ... It's a realistic scenario that can happen anytime."

The plan can be viewed online at www.oes.ca.gov.