

Experts predict major earthquake to hit

Samantha Tata, Calif. State University-Northridge Daily Sundial, 10-20-10

With consistently beautiful weather, picturesque landscapes and unending entertainment, the only downside to the place that is Los Angeles County—aside from the budget deficit—is its own flimsy foundation.

Southern California lies on a plate boundary, a major fault between the North American and Pacific plates, said Gerry Simila, CSUN geological professor and director of the Center for Earthquake Studies. Their fusion peeks through the surface at the San Andreas Fault, part of which runs along Palm Springs.

A 2004 film “10.5,” depicted a magnitude 10.5 earthquake striking the West Coast of the U.S. and Canada, toppling a large mass of that land into the ocean. While this prediction may live in the nightmares of some residents, they can rest assured that such a scenario will not happen.

“The fault slides sideways, it doesn’t open,” Simila said.

Still, the inhabitants of these unstable plates keep fears of the inevitable in the back of their minds, and their vehicles.

On Nordhoff Street, a white pick up truck sent a message to tailgaters and pedestrians alike using a makeshift wooden sign. Spray-painted in black ink, the truck told passersby, “Nature laughs last.”

Even though Northridge has not experienced a significant quake since 1994, the “big one” has become a topic of speculation following the major temblors that recently struck Haiti, Chile, Mexicali and China since the beginning of the year.

The “big one” is a magnitude 7.8 to 7.9 earthquake expected to strike on the San Andreas Fault, Simila said.

The thought of such a catastrophic event may be enough to lull residents into a false sense of calm in the vein of blissful ignorance.

“In general, most people don’t believe it will happen soon,” Simila said. “Since we don’t know exactly when it will happen, why worry about it?”

He said the fear is similar to that of being involved in a car accident during a daily drive.

There is a better chance of someone being in a car accident than in a major earthquake, Simila said.

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, published an extensive “how-to” list for before, during and after an earthquake on its website.

The agency authorities suggest that if residents are inside when an earthquake strikes, they should drop and cover away from glass, windows and outside doors or walls. Among the items on the list, most injuries occur when people who are indoors try to make their way outside.

Should someone be outside when the earth moves, he or she should remain outside and move away from buildings, streetlights and utility wires.

FEMA officials note in the website's Earthquake Disaster Information under the Plan and Prepare tab, "Many of the 120 fatalities from the 1933 Long Beach earthquake occurred when people ran outside of buildings only to be killed by falling debris from collapsing walls."

The earthquake that struck Northridge in 1994 originated on a blind thrust fault. That is, a fault that doesn't show through the earth's surface.

"We didn't know it was there until the earthquake happened," Simila said.

Last year more than 50 newly discovered faults that cover Southern California were mapped and published by the California Geological Survey. It is the first updated mapping of the state's fault activity in 16 years.

Simila said these maps should be in every classroom throughout the state to supplement awareness in addition to procedures already in place.

"Last October and next October are yearly Shakeouts," he said.

The Shakeouts are statewide exercises, specifically in Southern California, to raise awareness and provide emergency personnel to exercise their response to natural disasters and the lessons they learned from the Northridge earthquake.

"We can't predict or prevent," Simila said, "but we can prepare."