

SF State professor apologizes for Berkeley quake email that went viral

Doug Oakley, Bay Area News Group, 11-2-11

A San Francisco State University professor apologized Monday evening for starting an e-mail rumor that federal geologists were predicting a 6.0 magnitude earthquake in Berkeley in the next two to three weeks.

The professor, Genie Stowers, who is chair of the Department of Public Administration at the university, originally sent an e-mail to family and friends about the purported quake prediction following a swarm of quakes centered in the hills above Berkeley.

The email said one of her students, who works as an assistant to a Berkeley's City Council member, told her class that geologists were informing the council that the recent swarm of quakes indicated a bigger quake was coming.

After Stowers' e-mail made the rounds, and after four earthquakes of magnitude 3.0 or greater hit the region since Oct. 20, Berkeley's deputy city manager and the director of the Berkeley Fire Fighters' Association sent out their own e-mails saying no such briefings had occurred and that anyway, geologists are not in the business of making earthquake predictions.

In an apology sent to Berkeley City Councilman Kriss Worthington on Monday, Stowers said she had only sent the e-mail to family, close friends and colleagues with a message that "preparedness is good."

"It is unfortunate that this email instead went viral and has caused great concern among many in the Berkeley area ... It was a mistake and I regret that it happened."

Stowers said beyond her apology, she would make no further comments.

When contacted before Stowers issued her apology, Keith Knudsen, deputy director of the U.S. Geological Survey Earthquake Science Center in Menlo Park, said "I don't know of any scientific organization that would make a statement like that. We didn't."