

California slow to set up early quake warning system

Nannette Miranda , KGO (San Francisco television), 3-23-12

SACRAMENTO -- We live in earthquake country and yet California does not have an early warning system in place. The technology is available because countries like Japan and Mexico have it. So why not here?

After five years, an early earthquake warning system for California is in beta testing now, but given the state's financial crisis, no one can say when it will be ready for use statewide.

Estimates peg the costs at \$150 million to build and \$5 million a year to operate.

"Unfortunately, because of the budget times, we're having to take a percentage cut from that, and that's where we are looking to other institutions, whether it be the schools, the federal government or private entities, to fill the gap to continue to the work," said Kelly Huston with the California Emergency Management Agency.

Countries like Japan and Mexico, even Romania, have warning systems in place. But because of California's size, topography and other factors, it's actually harder to create one here.

"Because we live on top of the faults, it's a much more complicated endeavor than say in Mexico or Japan that have these early warning systems; the earthquakes tend to happen offshore," said Prof. Michael Oskin, Ph.D., a UC Davis geologist.

And living on top of faults means any early warning will be just a few seconds, if any.

For instance, on the state's beta system mimicking the Northridge earthquake, the early detection would have been able to give Downtown Los Angeles 11 seconds warning -- enough to shut down critical infrastructure like public transportation or a nearby nuclear power plant.

"It could even potentially give the public a few seconds heads up so they can drop, cover and hold on," said Huston.

Eventually, someone has to pay to connect the sensors to a central system that can send warnings across cell phone networks and TV and radio airwaves.

"The ability to save lives alone is incalculable," said Oskin.

So the hope for a fully implemented early warning system may lie in places like Stanford University where a quake catcher network can already detect some shakers 10 seconds beforehand.

One researcher at Caltech, which got a private grant last year, said that with adequate funding a system could be in place within three years.