

Geologists say they've heard from earthquake forecaster before

Say prediction is nearly impossible

Ben Baeder, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 4-14-10

PASADENA - The man who touched off an Internet-driven scare by predicting a major earthquake this week has a long history of bad guesses, said experts at the United States Geological Survey.

On his Web site - quakeprediction.com - Luke Thomas of Jupiter, Fla., predicted a major earthquake would strike Southern California this week.

The prediction prompted dozens of worried calls to the USGS office in Pasadena and more than a thousand broadcasts on the twitter.com Web site, which is used daily by millions of people.

USGS scientists do not agree there is any special danger of an earthquake this week, they said.

Thomas touched off a similar scare last year, said Erik Pounders, a geologist at the USGS in Pasadena.

"We've heard of him before," Pounders said. "I believe it was last year he did a similar thing and we got some calls. This gentleman has been doing this for years."

Thomas claims to use meteorological readings of infrared activity to make predictions. The heat created by tectonic activity alerts him that pressure is building along fault lines, he said.

He then uses an equation to determine probability of earthquakes in areas with high heat, he said.

Thomas, who became interested in earthquakes while working at a weather forecasting firm, said his measurements take into account hundreds of factors.

He said he has accurately predicted several major quakes during the last year, including a magnitude-5.8 quake in Northern California and was close with a guess on last week's magnitude-7.2 temblor near Mexicali.

"My methods are getting better every day," he said.

Pounders doubted Thomas' predictions.

Scientists in the 1970s thought they were on the cusp of predicting quakes, but they were wrong, he said.

Nobody has been accurate at forecasting when and how faults slip, Pounders said.

While someone every now and then accurately forecasts a large quake, such instances are rare, he said. Many earthquake forecasters make vague guesses - and lots of them, he said.

"If you throw a thousand darts at a dartboard, you eventually hit the bull's-eye," Pounders said.

He also questioned Thomas' method, saying that earthquakes are usually caused by activity miles beneath the earth's surface. Heat created by pressure would be absorbed and would not be detectable at the surface, he said.

"I just talked to one of our physicists," he said. "There wouldn't be any measurable heat."

He added that earthquakes create far less heat than people would expect.