



MEDIA RELEASE

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RELEASE DATE: November 1, 2005

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SUBJECT: New State Commission Tackles Earthquake Risks

(Anchorage) -- The toll of death and destruction from Alaska's next big earthquake could be reduced in advance, if a new state commission on seismic hazard reduction succeeds in its mission to assess risks, tighten building standards and improve disaster preparedness.

The Alaska Seismic Hazards Safety Commission held its first meeting in Anchorage on Friday to begin planning to prepare the nation's most seismically active state against future earthquakes. Governor Frank H. Murkowski appointed the nine members of the commission, joining with all other western states in establishing a state-level seismic advisory body.

The commission is charged with advising decision-makers at all levels of government and in the private sector about ways to reduce earthquake risks, and disseminating information on earthquake risk mitigation to the public, said John Aho, an Anchorage consulting engineer and chairman of Alaska's commission.

"Earthquake risk mitigation means more than just stockpiling supplies, knowing what to do when the ground shakes, and conducting preparedness drills," Aho said. "It means taking measures ahead of time to reduce vulnerability to damage and loss of life, like identifying areas at highest risk from earthquakes and tsunamis, using effective land-use and construction practices, and strengthening existing structures."

As the recent devastating earthquakes in Pakistan and Indonesia have so tragically demonstrated, substandard building practices and inadequate preparedness can result in significant loss of life and property damage, said Rod Combellick, an engineering geologist with the Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys in the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

"Alaska's earthquake risk is among the highest in the world," Combellick said. "The state experiences about 75 percent of all U.S. earthquakes, and we've got both a growing civilian population and an expanding infrastructure that is critical to our nation's military and energy security."

Alaska averages a magnitude 7 earthquake each year, and a magnitude 8 event about once every 14 years, said Roger Hansen, state seismologist and commission member. The 1964 Alaska earthquake was magnitude 9.2, among the three Alaska quakes ranking among the world's ten strongest. Hansen and other scientists warn that it is only a matter of time before another large quake strikes beneath a population center or triggers another major tsunami.

While much progress has been made improving Alaska's building practices and earthquake preparedness since 1964, many areas of concern remain. For example, a voter-approved, publicly funded engineering review of Kodiak Island school district facilities identified structural inadequacies that may make some schools unsafe during large earthquakes.

In addition to Combellick of DNR, Aho of CH2M Hill, and Hansen of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, the commission's members include: consulting geologist Gary Carver, Linda Freed of the City of Kodiak, Laura Kelly of the U.S. Coast Guard, Dennis Nottingham of Peratrovich Nottingham & Drage, Roger Schnell of the Alaska Department of Military & Veterans Affairs, and Michael Wilkinson of State Farm Insurance.

While the commission is due to expire by June 30, 2006, the Alaska Senate is considering legislation to extend it through June 2008 and expand its purview to include tsunami risks. House Bill 83 passed the Alaska House in 2004 and is now before the Senate. The commission will next meet on November 29 in Anchorage.

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