

Two major earthquakes strike in two days: Why aren't California's cities ready for the "big one"?

Dan Conway
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The largest series of earthquakes in two decades hit southern California on Thursday and Friday, resulting in significant damage to roads, homes and other buildings. A 6.4 magnitude quake hit Thursday centered near the desert city of Ridgecrest, approximately 150 miles northeast of Los Angeles. A second, even larger, quake hit the area on Friday, measuring 7.1 on the Richter scale.

Although there was no significant injury or loss of life, the quakes caused significant damage to homes and small businesses in Ridgecrest. Many residents in the city of 28,000 are now in a full-blown crisis, with some refusing to stay indoors, fearing further quakes which could cause their homes to collapse, opting instead to sleep outdoors or in their cars.

Friday's earthquake caused major damage to Ridgecrest, destroying gas lines and even setting some homes on fire. The quake did significant damage to several other communities throughout the state's Mojave Desert region and was powerful enough to be felt as far south as Baja, Mexico and as far east as Phoenix, Arizona. Current estimates put the overall economic damage from the quakes in the immediately affected communities at \$100 million.

At least 130 residents from the nearby communities of Bakersfield and Trona are now staying in temporary shelters, according to Kern County Fire Chief David Witt. Moreover, shocks from the Friday quake were powerful enough to close the State Route 178, the only road access to the community of Trona, population 2,000, which is now without any power or running water as a result of the quakes. Officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency have been delivering bottled water to the town's residents.

Those who have lived in the area around Ridgecrest for decades noted that despite experiencing a number of earthquakes, last week's were by far the most destructive. Susan Witcher, 67, told the Los Angeles Times: "I have lived here for 35 years and I just had to throw away 45 years' worth of stuff. We don't know if we will ever be able to move back in."

Many mobile homes and smaller structures have been yellow-tagged by county workers, indicating that they are no longer safe to live in. Those most affected will be impoverished members of the working class and retirees, for whom earthquake and other disaster insurance is prohibitively expensive. Most will not be able

to find any housing on their own. Of the thousands of area residents now living outdoors in triple-degree heat during the daytime, many will be forced to make such living arrangements permanent.

Whatever resources are eventually made available will not be used to make residents whole but will be deployed to make repairs to Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake, which has been deemed "not mission capable" following the two tremors.

The military weapons proving ground, created during World War II, is the US Navy's largest single landholding, encompassing an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. Damage estimates along with reports of possible casualties have thus far been kept from the press, although they are likely extensive, as the epicenters of the two main quakes lay within the base's boundaries.

Firefighters from cities throughout the state have taken position in the affected region and remain on high alert in the event of additional aftershocks. Approximately 200 troops from the California National Guard, along with logistical support and aircraft, have been mobilized, and military branches throughout California have been put on alert, ready to respond in the event of any civil unrest as a result of any further quakes.

For the latest round of earthquakes in Ridgecrest, the US Geological Survey has reported that the region suffered from more than 4,700 smaller quakes at an average of more than one per minute. John Bellini, a geophysicist with the survey, noted that the region may see additional quake swarms within the next few weeks.

Caltech seismologist and noted earthquake expert Lucy Jones said that the quakes hitting the area are part of an ongoing "very energetic system." By an "energetic system," Jones meant the possibility of an even larger earthquake, although historically rare, could not be ruled out. "It is clearly a very energetic sequence, so there's no reason to think we can't have more large earthquakes."

On Friday, California governor Gavin Newsom visited Ridgecrest, declaring a state of emergency for the city along with other parts of Kern and San Bernardino counties. Thousands in the area have been left without power and 911 operators were overwhelmed with calls for medical assistance. The earthquakes caused significant damage to roads, water lines and gas lines, the latter of which sparked numerous fires.

Newsom also promised to work with President Donald Trump to

obtain a national emergency declaration in order to release federal funds and resources. Newsom reported that he had engaged the president in a phone call Friday in which the president vowed to give the governor “whatever you need” to respond to the disaster.

“We don’t agree on everything but one area where there’s no politics, and we worked extraordinarily well together, is on emergency response and recovery, and increasing that emergency preparedness,” Newsom said. “I have all the confidence in the world that the president will be forthcoming in immediate terms with the federal declaration.”

After more than two days, however, the President has yet to make any such declaration.

In saying that the governor’s office and Trump “worked extraordinarily well together,” Newsom is doubtless referring to trips the president took to California in the aftermath of last year’s wildfires, which caused extensive damage, including the complete destruction of the town of Paradise, formerly with a population of 26,000. The public relations visit by Trump, Newsom and former governor Jerry Brown in fact resulted in absolutely nothing for residents. The town of Paradise has not been rebuilt and tens of thousands of wildfire victims are still waiting to be made whole.

Like the wildfires, last week’s earthquakes have in fact revealed the utter unpreparedness of American capitalism for foreseeable natural disasters. Seismologists and other earthquake experts regularly deliver reports on the danger of future earthquakes and the state’s lack of preparedness, with little to no action.

There was no public notification whatsoever prior to the earthquakes on either Thursday or Friday, a point which has caused severe political embarrassment for the new state governor. In fact, Los Angeles is the only city in California which currently has a public earthquake alert system.

That system, however, was not triggered by last week’s tremors, as the threshold magnitude must be over 5. Nonetheless, residents of the city of more than 4 million people felt extended periods of shaking lasting more than 10 seconds each, leaving residents wondering if the “big one,” the massive San Andreas fault line earthquake predicted by seismologists, had finally arrived.

A larger \$100 million West Coast earthquake alert system is only halfway completed, according to the US Geological Survey, which is responsible for its implementation. A few institutions such as schools, transportation networks and other industries have been set up as test users; however, only half the needed seismic-monitoring systems have thus far been completed.

The current goal is to fully implement the system by June 2021, almost two years from now. The fact that such a system is not in place already, especially at its relatively modest cost and the ubiquity of smartphones which are configured to deliver other emergency alerts is a severe indictment of the capitalist system.

While the early warning system can typically provide advance notice of seconds at best due to the speed at which earthquakes propagate, such advance notice could nonetheless prove critical in saving lives. This would give residents time to find shelter, end surgeries, turn on emergency generators and make other critical preparations.

The state of California on its own represents the fifth largest economy in the entire world, while the cost of the public

earthquake warning system is only a small fraction of the total wealth of some the state’s wealthiest individuals, including Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, the wealthiest, with a net worth of \$74 billion.

Nevertheless, funding cuts for the program have been aggressively pursued by the Trump administration, a fact that Democratic party leaders like Newsom actively seek to obscure, especially in their cynical promises to “work with” Trump.

Trump in fact attempted to slash federal funding for the advance warning program by \$8.2 million in his fiscal 2018 budget request. While the proposed cut was later restored by the House of Representatives, the administration later proposed a \$26.7 million cut from the USGS budget for fiscal year 2019, including a cut of more than \$10 million from the earthquake early warning system.

The full proposal was blocked by Congress in the final bill. However, the portion of the USGS budget related to natural hazards, including earthquakes and volcanoes, nonetheless decreased by 7 percent as compared to the previous year. This effort to cut several million dollars from research which could prevent death and devastation from natural disasters occurs while the President, with the full complicity of the Democrats, pushes a \$750 billion budget for the Pentagon through Congress, the largest on record.

The area around Ridgecrest is part of what is known as the Eastern California Shear Zone. Running from the northern California/Nevada border all the way south to connect with the infamous San Andreas fault north of Los Angeles, the shear zone is notable for regular patterns of earthquake swarms, groups of several thousand quakes under magnitude 6.0. The last substantial earthquake to hit the region with a significant mainshock was the magnitude 5.4 quake, which hit in August 1995. That earthquake spawned more than 2,500 aftershocks over the next five weeks, culminating in a larger 5.8 magnitude temblor the following September.

The impact of last week’s earthquakes pales in comparison to the impact of a similar quake in a major metropolitan area such as San Francisco, Los Angeles or San Diego. The last such disaster was the 1994 Northridge quake, which resulted in 57 deaths and more than 8,700 injured. Prior to that, the 1989 San Francisco earthquake led to 63 fatalities and 3,757 injured. Scientists estimate, however, that a new earthquake, particularly after years of relative quiet on the San Andreas fault, could result in a much larger disaster.

The question, according to seismologists, is not if such an event happens again but when it will happen. Current estimates put the damage caused by such an event at \$213 billion with 1,800 lives lost.



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