

Utah's Salt Lake Valley shaken by 5.7 magnitude earthquake, compounding coronavirus crisis

Evan Cohen
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Early Wednesday morning, a magnitude 5.7 earthquake shook Utah's Wasatch Front, the most populous region of the intermountain west, home to about 2 million people. The earthquake was state's largest in 28 years and was felt as far away as Wyoming and Idaho. As of this writing, more than 59 aftershocks, up to magnitude 4.6, hit the valley, and more are expected throughout the week.

The United States Geological Survey placed the epicenter of the earthquake 3.1 miles north of Magna, Utah, a working class town adjacent to the Rio Tinto Kennecott Copper Mine and its tailings. The earthquake is considered moderate and caused relatively minor damage and delays across the Salt Lake Valley.

The Salt Lake International Airport, a vital air traffic hub, was evacuated, and flights were diverted to surrounding airports. Thousands of travelers were placed on busses, in close quarters. Air travel was grounded for about five hours, and rail transportation across the valley was suspended.

A chemical plume, reportedly the result of a hydrochloric acid spill, was released into the atmosphere from the Kennecott copper mine's refinery, prompting the National Guard to deploy to monitor air quality.

In downtown Salt Lake City, office buildings were evacuated, cracks formed in brick foundations, and chunks of plaster from historic buildings like the Rio Grande Depot fell to the ground. Other damage across the valley included gas and water main breaks and structural damage to highways and historic buildings, including 14 buildings in Magna, where 100 people were evacuated from the town.

More than 73,000 people, the majority of them isolated due to fears over the coronavirus pandemic, reported power outages.

School districts in the valley, which closed to students Monday to prevent the spread of coronavirus, were forced to suspend lunch and laptop distribution as a result of the earthquake.

The decision to close Salt Lake's K-12 schools was delayed until after classes let out this past Friday, with teachers reporting widespread outrage at the Utah school superintendent's promise to close schools only when students were in "imminent danger." At least two students have tested positive for COVID-19 as of this writing. Teachers were given three days to ensure that tens of thousands of students could continue their educations from home.

Reflective of the United States as a whole, the number of COVID-19 cases has continued to rise in Utah but provides no real picture of the number of people carrying the virus. The earthquake disrupted vital research and testing being performed at the University of Utah and nearby medical centers. Utah's COVID-19 hotline, where calls reporting symptoms are routed, was temporarily suspended. The Utah Department of Public Health's testing sites and labs were closed and inspected for damage, delaying already limited COVID-19 testing amid a startling shortage of supplies.

As of this writing, Utah has 112 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and only roughly 1,000 confirmed tests. In Salt Lake County and the counties surrounding, K-12 schools have been closed and dine-in restaurant services have been suspended.

According to a *Salt Lake Tribune* report, Utah

residents who are symptomatic are being told by health officials “not to seek testing unless they are so sick they require extra medical care.” The state, which saw its first case of COVID-19 in early February, is facing a shortage of chemical reagents in and protective gear in both public and private labs, the result of official malign neglect in the United States as a whole.

As the restaurant, entertainment and tourism industries conduct mass layoffs across Utah, local governments are addressing relief efforts to small businesses by offering loans, but offering nothing for the growing numbers of unemployed. In 2018, Salt Lake City gave a \$5.6 million tax cut to Amazon for their SLC-1 Fulfillment Center.

As workers in the Salt Lake Valley recover from the added shock of Wednesday’s earthquake and brace themselves for the full onset of coronavirus, the dual disasters reveal the state’s startling lack of preparedness for predictable natural disasters and show the necessity of a rational, scientifically planned society, capable of providing houses up to modern earthquake codes as well as rapid responses to public health emergencies.



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