

Where We Stand Today in Communicating Earthquake Preparedness and Risk

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ABSTRACT

Californian's fear earthquakes more than any other natural disaster, but most people in the State are surprisingly unprepared for—if not oblivious to—the threat posed by a catastrophic seismic event.* As an example, after two years of education/outreach preceding the 100th anniversary of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Mayor Newsom stated that only 10 per cent of the city's residents were prepared for another major earthquake. This is not the exception but the norm for many in earthquake risk states. Why is it so difficult to motivate decision-makers and the public to be more pro-active and take action?

The process of communication of earthquake risk to decision-makers today is the same as it was 30 years ago. At that time, earthquake mitigation and preparedness programs had relatively minor competition for funds from the other natural disasters. Today, the situation is dramatically different. The public is bombarded with bad news continually by the news media. This in turn, has a major impact on how decision-makers prioritize some of their actions. Now other societal concerns provide direct competition for earthquake preparedness and risk programs within states at risk from earthquakes in the U.S. These disaster and societal needs competitors include but are not limited to, the following:

- Terrorism
- Global Warming
- Sea Level Rise
- Pandemic
- Budget Deficits
- Crumbling Infrastructure
- Gangs
- Hospital Induced Fatalities (infection, malpractice)
- Recession Fears
- Trans Fats
- Hurricanes
- Drought
- Wildfires
- Loan defaults

Although this list of competing societal issues may seem overwhelming, developing a new strategy that demonstrates how earthquake mitigation programs can apply to some of the issues listed above may be the best approach. For example, many of the pre and post event actions now being developed in business continuity plans to respond to a global pandemic have already been identified in many earthquake strategic plans.

Many individuals approach decision-makers with the belief that earthquake risk is “obvious” and there is no need to spend the time to explain the problem clearly. Unfortunately, in many cases, it is not obvious. Therefore, information must be presented to a decision-maker in a form that illustrates that earthquakes present the most significant risk to his or her constituents while they are in office.

The earthquake community has outstanding risk communicators and educators. The challenge now is to draw on the best and the brightest of them, close ranks, support them, and craft a totally new strategy on how to get the message to the decision-makers in a style that will result in action.

*Quote from Art Center College of Design’s the Los Angeles Earthquake Project: Get Ready