

Western States Seismic Policy Council
2012 Lifetime Achievement Award in Seismic Risk Reduction
John L. Aho



Dr. John L. Aho, Chairman of the Alaska Seismic Hazards Safety Commission, has been selected to receive the 2012 WSSPC Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his over thirty five years of service as a dedicated leader in earthquake engineering and seismic risk reduction policy.

Born in Anchorage and the son of a pioneer Alaska bush pilot, Dr. Aho holds a Ph.D. in aerospace engineering from Cornell University with an emphasis in structural engineering. Dr. Aho was a vice president and principal project manager with the engineering and construction firm CH2M HILL. During his career he was involved as a project manager and/or designer in over 300 projects located throughout the State of Alaska. Although retired from CH2MHILL, he continues to work with them on current projects.

John Aho was a prime mover behind the establishment of a state seismic safety commission in Alaska over a period of 20 years. He began tirelessly supporting this effort in 1985 when the first legislative bill was drafted to establish a multi-hazard Natural Hazards Safety Commission. John made the initial legislative contact, convincing a state senator to sponsor and introduce the bill. For a variety of unrelated political reasons, this bill did not pass, nor did several subsequent bills introduced in the 1990s. However, John was unrelenting in his support and gave eloquent testimony in favor of the legislation in every legislative hearing. In the meantime, an ad hoc advisory committee met regularly to keep the ball rolling, identify and discuss seismic hazard issues, and hone the draft legislation. Because of John's exceptional organizational and leadership skills, he chaired nearly all of these meetings.

In 2001, legislation was introduced to establish the Alaska Seismic Hazards Safety Commission, with members to be appointed by the governor from a broad spectrum of public and private-sector earthquake professionals. Again, John Aho gave strong and effective supporting testimony at every committee hearing. The bill finally passed both the House and Senate and was signed into law by the governor in 2002. It was three years before the next governor appointed the first members, including John, in 2005. The Commission immediately began meeting monthly, most often via teleconference but also face-to-face two or three times annually. John was elected chair of the Commission at the first meeting, a position he continues to hold.

Since the Commission's first meeting in 2005, John Aho has guided it through an annual chartering process to solidify the commitment of its members to its seismic safety mission and goals, and maintains a running action item list to keep members moving on their assigned tasks. He has frequently briefed high-level state and local officials, legislators, and organizations on seismic hazard policies and the activities and priorities of the Commission for reducing Alaska's seismic risk. These groups have included the Alaska Partnership for Infrastructure Protection, Chugach Electric Association, Pioneers of Alaska, Local Emergency Planning Committee Association, and Elmendorf Air Force Base Alaskan Command and Joint Task Force.

Dr. Aho's service to the State of Alaska also includes work as an instructor for earthquake mitigation and post-earthquake safety evaluation, advisor to the University of Alaska Anchorage's engineering program, many years of service on the Municipality of Anchorage's Geotechnical Advisory Commission, and long-time chair of the Alaska Chapter of the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute. He also serves as Chairman of the Alaska Advisory Committee for the Advanced National Seismic System (ANSS) and in 2004 was awarded the Alaska Commendation Medal for his work in seismic risk mitigation. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Sciences degree from the University of Alaska Anchorage in 2006 which cited his "service to the state, to the university, and to humankind".