

California gets funds for quake warning system

December 15 2014, by Michael R. Blood

California has received a spurt of federal funding to expand an earthquake warning system intended to provide enough time for trains to brake, utilities and factories to shut off gas lines, and people to dive under a table until the shaking stops.

But the money is far short of what's need to finish the job statewide.

California trails Japan, Mexico and other earthquake-prone areas in developing a public alert system, which ideally would provide several seconds of warning after a fault ruptures.

Scientists have tried to make the public alert system now in pilot stages more widely available, but money has been a problem. A joint statement Monday from Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Burbank, said \$5 million had been set aside to continue the work as part of a spending bill approved by Congress.

Feinstein called it "a down payment." By some estimates, developing a statewide system could cost \$80 million. Scientists would like to install hundreds of additional sensors to pick up vibrations along big faults, like the San Andreas.

Schiff told reporters in Pasadena that the reluctance to fully finance the system was "inexplicable, given how much is at stake."

The funding will expand a limited program developed by the California

Institute of Technology; the University of California, Berkeley; and the University of Washington in conjunction with the U.S. Geological Survey.

Seismic early warning systems are designed to detect the first shock waves from a large jolt, calculate the strength and alert people before the slower but damaging waves spread.

The systems can't predict quakes and are most useful during big events where it would be meaningful to warn people far away to expect strong shaking, scientists said.

Several moderate earthquakes this year in Southern California produced successful early warnings. Officials testing the system in San Francisco got eight seconds of warning before strong shaking arrived from the 6.0-magnitude earthquake near Napa in August.

Geophysicist Douglas D. Given, an early warning coordinator for the USGS, said the speed of the system also needs to be improved, particularly since the Internet, cellphones and other systems needed to alert people could be disrupted by shaking.

He said the goals are to increase the number of stations receiving seismic information, improving software and expanding ways to educate the public, since it will be up to individuals, schools and businesses what to do to prepare and how to react.

Like a report on an upcoming storm on TV, "They tell you what the weather is going to be, but they don't buy you an umbrella," Givens said.

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