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Killer Buildings Here at Home Are a Predictable Surprise

OPINION by: Eric Holdeman



Damage Caused by Unreinforced Masonry (URM) Building FEMA PHOTO

FOLSOM, CA - The tragedy of earthquakes, first in Haiti and now Chile, continues to be played out on our television screens. While most Americans look at this situation as being that of a third-world country, the risks that we live with today include some of those that have taken their deadly toll in Haiti. That is the presence of unreinforced masonry buildings here in the United States. As the Chile earthquake shows, even though there may be strong building codes many older buildings remaining risk.

Most people believe that we have modern building codes that are properly enforced. These codes apply to new construction and were enacted based on lessons learned from previous emergencies and disasters. As a fire official once told me, "Every line in the fire code is written in blood." Without the experience of a disaster we are slow to change our fire or building codes.

However, the "as built" infrastructure remains as it

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NOAA Hurricane Team to Visit Massachusetts

FALMOUTH, MA - NOAA hurricane experts will visit five U.S. East Coast cities, including Falmouth, Massachusetts, aboard a NOAA hurricane hunter aircraft to raise awareness about storm threats and the danger of being caught without a personal hurricane plan.

"The 2010 hurricane season was one of the most active on record, yet no hurricanes made landfall in the U.S. That does not mean we will be as

fortunate during the 2011 season," said Bill Read, director of NOAA's National Hurricane Center. "Be prepared for a hurricane now, before one threatens your area."

Read, along with senior hurricane specialist Daniel Brown and storm surge team leader Jamie Rhome, will travel with the crew when the aircraft visits Falmouth, Mass. The public and media are invited to tour the aircraft and meet the team on (continued on page 2)



Hurricane Hunter Aircraft

NOAA PHOTO

FEMA Partners Meet on Earthquake Mitigation and Preparedness



Ed Laatsch, FEMA BOISE, ID - On April 5–7th, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) met in Boise, Idaho with State earthquake program managers and other partners for the 2011 National Earthquake Program Managers Meeting (NEPM). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss earthquake mitigation and preparedness strategies for the U.S. Also attending the meeting were staff from the U.S. Geological Survey, the Central U.S. Earthquake Consortium, the Northeast States Emergency Consortium, the Western States Seismic Policy Council and the Cascadia Region Earthquake Workgroup.

“This meeting could not come at a more critical time,” said Ed Laatsch, Director of the FEMA National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program (NEHRP) and Chief of the FEMA Building Science Branch. “The events in Japan have shown us again that earthquakes are a matter of life and death. When a nation is prepared, and seismic designed building codes are adopted and enforced, lives will be saved.”

NEHRP, which was first authorized by Congress more than 30 years ago, seeks to mitigate earthquake losses in the United States by continuous research to develop cost-effective risk reduction measures, and actively promoting their implementation.

This year, as in previous years, earthquake mitigation and preparedness discussions on training, outreach resources, developments in earthquake science and technology, and ways to assist each other in implementation efforts dominated the 3-day meeting. Sessions included improving seismic risk assessments with GIS and HAZUS; roll out of the new FEMA structural assessment software tool, ROVER; and the use of social media.

The goal of the NEPM meeting is to continue dialogue and relationship building between State Earthquake Program Managers. By bringing together federal, regional and state earthquake programs, as well as the earthquake consortia, attendees walked away with a greater understanding of the what different agencies and organizations can do for each other, and ways to implement a successful earthquake program.

Participating from the NESEC States were Ed Fratto, Executive Director, NESEC, Dan O’Brien representing the New York State Office of Emergency Management, Beth Barton, representing the Maine Emergency Management Agency and Paul Morey, representing FEMA Region 1.

Killer Buildings Here at Home

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was constructed before engineers had design information or modern seismic standards were put in place. Therefore in the majority of communities in the United States there remains a legacy of buildings that are not capable of surviving a significant earthquake without serious damage or possible collapse.

These unreinforced masonry buildings may date from before the turn of the century, well into the 1930s and possibly beyond. Look in any older section of downtown areas throughout Illinois and the United States and you will see historic brick buildings that remain and are being used as businesses and homes.

Ask any seismic engineer and they will tell you that these unreinforced masonry buildings are not seismically stable in an earthquake. Depending on the soils that those buildings are constructed on it may not take a significant earthquake to damage or destroy this class of buildings.

While California has been addressing the issue of unreinforced masonry buildings for many decades there has been no such comprehensive effort in the rest of the states with earthquake hazards.

People seem to think that it’s only California that has a serious earthquake problem. Other West Coast states like Washington and Oregon also have significant earthquake risks. Other Western states with earthquake hazards include Arizona, Nevada and Idaho.

The New Madrid Fault zone can have earthquakes that impact up to seven states: Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi. Like the Haiti earthquake, it’s been almost 200 years since the last great quake on that fault.

The Northeast is also not immune from earthquakes. There’s a long history of recorded earthquakes from the 1600s up until today. New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire are all states that have had earthquake damages in the past.

Simply conducting an inventory of unreinforced masonry buildings and documenting the number and location of them will help in educating building officials and building owners to the threat that exists.

Our typical path to solving an infrastructure problem is to wait and only “fix it on failure.” When the bridge, road or building does fail we will act astonished as though we didn’t expect it to happen. While the timing of an earthquake may be a surprise, the results of having unreinforced concrete buildings being used on a daily basis and their vulnerability to ground shaking can only be called a “predictable surprise.”

A recent early morning earthquake in Illinois can either be a wake-up call to take action, or a snooze alarm event. When the next major quake does happen somewhere other than California we can all act surprised.

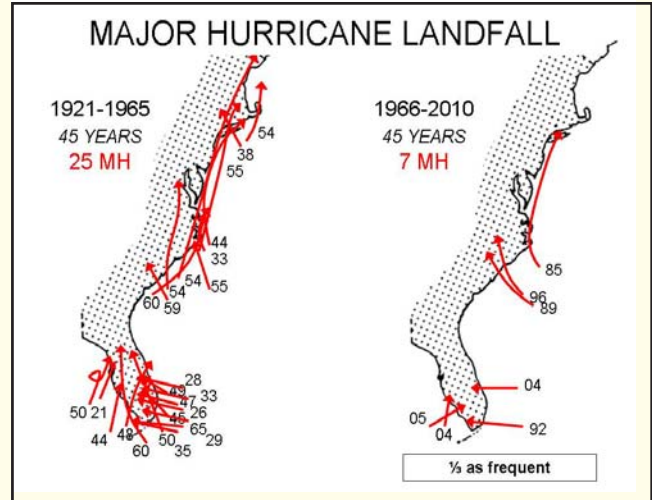
Forecasters Predict Above-Average 2011 Atlantic Hurricane Season

FORT COLLINS - In its 28th year of issuing predictions, the Colorado State University forecast team is predicted an above-average 2011 Atlantic hurricane season.

The CSU team is calling for 16 named storms forming in the Atlantic basin between June 1 and Nov. 30. Nine of those are expected to turn into hurricanes with five developing into major hurricanes (Category 3-4-5).

“We expect that anomalously warm tropical Atlantic sea surface temperatures combined with neutral tropical Pacific sea surface temperatures will contribute to an active season,” said Phil Klotzbach of the CSU Tropical Meteorology Project. “We have reduced our forecast slightly from early December due to a combination of recent ocean warming in the eastern and central tropical Pacific and recent cooling in the tropical Atlantic.”

“It is recommended that all vulnerable coastal residents make the same hurricane preparations every year, regardless of how active or inactive the seasonal forecast is,” Klotzbach



Major Hurricanes 1921-1965 & 1966-2010 SOURCE CSU said. “It takes only one landfall event near you to make this an active season.”

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NOAA Hurricane Team to Visit Massachusetts

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Monday May 2 at the Mass. Military Reservation, Falmouth, Mass., from 2:30 pm. to 5:30 p.m.

The NOAA WP-3D Orion turboprop aircraft is used primarily by scientists on research missions to study various elements of a hurricane, flying through the eye of the storm several times each flight. The crew collects and transmits data by satellite directly to the National Hurricane Center so that forecasters can analyze and predict changes to the hurricane’s path and strength.

Staff from local emergency management offices and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, non-profit organizations such as the American Red Cross, and several local NOAA National Weather Service forecast offices will be part of the team at each stop.

GIS/HAZUS Assistance for State & Local Governments

WAKEFIELD, MA - The Northeast States Emergency Consortium (NESEC) can provide your town, city, county or state with an easy-to-understand damage report and HAZUS-MH disaster simulation covering the impacts of any earthquake, hurricane or flood. The reports include dollar damage estimates, shelter requirements, debris estimates, and much more. To request your FREE disaster simulation reports, simply visit <http://www.nesec.org/resources/> and fill out the HAZUS-GIS Assistance Request Form. Forms can then be sent to your state Director of Emergency Management for signature approval and forwarding to NESEC.

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