

The Oregonian
January 24, 2021

Opinion: Because disasters don't wait, our earthquake preparation can't either

Updated Jan 24, 6:15 AM; Posted Jan 24, 6:15 AM



Ancient sitka spruce trees emerge from the beach during a low tide at Neskowin on the Oregon coast. The so-called "ghost forest" is thought to have been buried during a massive earthquake 2,000 years ago, initially uncovered by storms in the late 1990s. (Jamie Hale/The Oregonian)LC- Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

By Guest Columnist

Debbie Moller

Moller, who previously worked in the Oregon Office of Emergency Management, is a senior fellow at the Center of Excellence, Homeland Security and Emergency Management in Washington and author of "Get Ready – How to Prepare for and Stay Safe After a Pacific Northwest Earthquake." She lives in Salem.

Last January, few of us thought about the deadly pandemic of 1918. Scientists warned a similar pandemic was inevitable someday. Even if we took the warnings seriously, we didn't expect our lives and our communities to be as utterly transformed as they were in 2020. We weren't ready. Our government wasn't ready.

Until a pandemic comes, a wildfire threatens or an earthquake begins, we have a hard time acting as if such a thing could happen to us. If we haven't experienced it before, we don't expect to experience it at all.

This January marks the 321st anniversary of the last full-rupture subduction zone earthquake in our region. The Cascadia earthquake of January 26, 1700 was so massive it caused a tsunami that traveled 4,700 miles across the Pacific Ocean to strike Japan. Scientists warn that another earthquake of similar size is inevitable – it's not a question of if, but when.

I'm a fifth-generation Oregon native. I've never lived through a major earthquake and neither did my ancestors. Still, I can all too easily imagine what a Cascadia earthquake will mean.

In 2016, I spent four days immersed in Cascadia Rising, a realistic simulation of what might happen in our region after the next 9.0, full-fault rupture earthquake. The exercise involved over 20,000 first responders, emergency managers, military personnel, government officials and disaster relief workers. Along the 620-mile stretch of the off-shore fault, from British Columbia to Northern California, we all pretended the earthquake had happened. The stress was intense as the barriers to getting help to communities became all too clear.

Cascadia Rising taught us that it will take two weeks for even necessities like water and food to reach mega-earthquake survivors. When the shaking starts, we'll be living in the 21st century. When the shaking stops, we'll be living in 1850 – no electricity, utilities, internet or cell service, running water or sanitation systems. The loss of modern tools will dramatically delay the arrival of outside help.

I understand if you find it maddening that someone would want you to think about an earthquake after all we've gone through in the last year. Everyone has had enough. We are all stretched to the limit. So it wouldn't surprise me if people's responses border on stunned outrage with reactions like "What about everything that is already happening?" Or "What gall to talk about an earthquake!" And most concerning: "Now is not the time."

But the unprecedented wildfires didn't wait for the pandemic to be over. Disasters don't wait in an orderly line, politely agreeing to go one at a time. There is no guarantee we'll be spared another catastrophe just because 2020 brought infinitely more than our fair share of trouble. For the fortunate few who have been spared financial losses during the pandemic, now may be a perfect time to become prepared. Perhaps the money you used to spend on movies, travel or other pre-pandemic pleasures can be spent on getting your household ready. For the many who have been hard hit by job loss or illness, storing tap water for emergency use is a no-cost step that can be lifesaving in case of an earthquake.

The Oregon Office of Emergency Management website, www.oregon.gov/OEM, provides information on how to become "Two-Weeks Ready."

After everything we've been through, we know now that hypothetical disasters can and do hit home. We have a chance to better prepare for the next one.