

Illinois National Guard Participates in Earthquake Response Workshop

Written by readMedia

Monday, 20 September 2010 14:51

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SPRINGFIELD, IL (09/17/2010)(readMedia)-- The New Madrid Seismic Zone was the subject of a three-day conference here in which movers and shakers from all over the country, and Central and South America, met to plan for the eventuality of a major earthquake.

More than 250 National Guard leaders from more than 30 states – including Illinois and the seven other states that would be most affected by a major earthquake along the infamous fault line that once moved the mighty Mississippi River in 1812–met Sept. 14 to 16 to discuss capabilities, shortfalls and response planning.

Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee are all members of the Central United States Earthquake Consortium (CUSEC), whose mission is the reduction of deaths, injuries, property damage and economic losses resulting from earthquakes in the central United States.

The workshop was held at the National Guard Bureau's Professional Education Center, on Camp Robinson in North Little Rock, Ark., and included presentations by CUSEC, the National Emergency Management Association, the Arkansas Geological Survey, Civil Air Patrol, U.S. Southern and Northern Commands. Even America's largest retailer, Wal-Mart, offered a look at its planned disaster response efforts.

It is widely accepted that an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.0 or greater would quickly

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absorb the response capabilities of each of the directly-affected states. According to Brig. Gen. Steven P. Huber, Land Component Commander and Director of the Joint Staff for the Illinois National Guard, the main focus of the workshop was to proactively identify capabilities and gaps, and where the respective states could turn for help.

"I think the value is in getting to meet the people within the regions, specifically the folks around the impact area, and to do some coordinating," said Huber, a Chicago native. "We can talk about what we can bring to the table as well as what we feel we need. We would rather get to know these people and shake their hand here than at the scene of an incident."

Dr. Paul Stockton, the assistant secretary of defense for Homeland Defense and Americas' Security Affairs, was the keynote speaker on Tuesday, Sept. 14. Stockton gave a comprehensive presentation, centering on a unity of effort concept between the federal government, active duty military units, National Guard units, state governments and local emergency managers.

He led a discussion following his remarks, where he sought input from everyone in the room as to how best achieve unity of effort in the face of a catastrophe such as an earthquake in the center of the country.

According to CUSEC, there were no seismological measurements in 1812, but recent studies and contemporary reports suggest the magnitude of the largest of four earthquakes centering near New Madrid, Mo., was approximately 7.8. Fortunately, in 1812 the area was sparsely populated with few buildings and supporting infrastructure.

Today, the region is home to millions of people, including those in the cities of St. Louis, Mo., and Memphis, Tenn. Adding to the danger, most structures in the region were not built to withstand earthquake shaking, as they have been in more seismically active areas like California.

According to Scott Ausbrooks of the Arkansas Geological Survey, one of the greatest dangers lies in the phenomenon of liquefaction, which occurs when loose, sandy, water-saturated soils are strongly shaken. According to Ausbrooks, the soils lose their capacity to bear any weight and can flow like a liquid.

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Ausbrooks and many other experts in the room agreed that an earthquake of such magnitude would knock out communication and nearly all of the bridges in the Mississippi River basin in the affected states. Scientists estimate that a magnitude 6.0 or larger earthquake is overdue in the region and could hit the Mississippi Valley at any time.

"All of the available resources, military and civilian, will be consumed quickly," explained Maj. Gen. William Wofford, the adjutant general of the Arkansas National Guard. "We will be overwhelmed.

"The response needs are going to exceed all of the available military and civilian assets," said Wofford. "The affected states will need to look to other states to fulfill any shortfalls."

Emergency Management Assistance Compacts between the states were at the center of many discussions at the workshop.

"We have a number of handshake agreements, but we have a lot of work ahead of us," said Wofford. "We all came to the workshop to work and to plan, which is key, but it's a work in progress."

According to Wofford, the agreements hammered out this year will be reviewed next year, taking into account troop deployments and operations considerations in the responding states.

"The planning aspect is the real benefit of a workshop like this, and having the National Guard Bureau, the federal government, civilian agencies and supporting states here is invaluable," said Wofford. "We've communicated, we've coordinated and now we're cooperating."