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Obama orders federal buildings brought up to earthquake safety

By **David Perlman** Updated 4:50 pm, Tuesday, February 2, 2016

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Richard Allen of the UC Seismological Laboratory was among those taking part in a White House conference on quakes.

President Obama ordered all federal buildings across the country Tuesday to meet new federal standards for earthquake resistance.

He signed his executive order as scientists from California and the Pacific Northwest reported during an all-day White House conference that an early-warning earthquake system is now in the final stages of development and ready for deployment to utilities and transportation networks along the West Coast.

Interior Secretary **Sally Jewell**, who announced the president's order, said the aim is "to reduce post-earthquake losses to affected communities and ensure that federal assets are available to help with recoveries."

The order did not set a compliance deadline, but noted that its goal is to reduce the "risk to the lives of building occupants and improving continued performance of essential functions following (a major) earthquake."

During the White House meeting, scientists and government officials reviewed in general any progress made by communities large and small to prepare adequately for earthquakes and to recover from major ones.

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Jewell, a Washington state native, noted that her house is close to the dangerous Seattle Fault and is “designed for a magnitude 9 quake.” She told the meeting that the president’s order is intended to make sure that federal buildings — new or old — are built or strengthened to be earthquake-resistant up to the latest building codes.

“They will make sure that a natural phenomenon doesn’t become a human tragedy,” Jewell said.

But the highlight of the session was a report from scientists who for more than a decade have been designing an earthquake early-warning system that will cover all of California and the Pacific Northwest.

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Richard Allen of the **University of California Seismological Laboratory** at Berkeley described the system known as ShakeAlert and said it could provide 20 to 30 seconds of warning to people in California if and when a magnitude 8 earthquake ruptures the ground along the San Andreas Fault.

The next steps, he said, will be to get television and radio stations to agree to broadcast the system’s warnings and, as in Japan, for computer networks to reach everyone with a cell phone — “wearing the warning in your pocket,” as Allen said.

“The technology works, and it’s ready,” he said.

The meeting was inspired by an article in the **New Yorker magazine** in June that described what is the most dangerous fault system in America.

It is called the **Cascadia Subduction Zone**, an active undersea fault that extends for 620 miles from Vancouver Island in Washington to Cape Mendocino in California. It is capable of generating earthquakes of magnitude 9 or greater.

Nowhere is the need for early warnings greater than in that Cascadia zone, said **John E. Vidale**, director of the **Pacific Northwest Seismic Network**.

In Washington and Oregon, he said, an undersea network of quake sensors must be built all along the Cascadia zone that would warn when monster quakes are about to shake the land and tsunamis may threaten miles of heavily populated and low-lying land.

“We have a plan for earthquake early warning,” Vidale said. “The plan is open, widely tested, evolving and sophisticated. It is well on its way to helping protect lives and property along the West Coast, and we urge it be brought quickly and fully into use.”

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