

# Obama Budget Guts Earthquake Preparedness and Recovery

by Carl Osgood

April 4—If a government has the means to reduce loss of life and property from a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, and fails to do so, it is guilty of criminal negligence. Large areas of the United States, especially the Western States, are at risk of a major earthquake, perhaps one as powerful as the March 11 earthquake that struck Japan, yet the measures needed to forecast, mitigate the effect of, and recover from such an event have been deteriorating for years, and that problem is being further aggravated by the Obama Administration's budget proposal, which reduces spending for these measures even further.

The National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program (NEHRP), created by Congress in 1977, has been hobbled for years by consistent underfunding and the removal of earthquake forecasting from its original mandate, and has been further weakened by the fact that NASA has never been a part of it. One inspiration for that original goal of earthquake forecasting was an accurate Chinese forecast and the ensuing evacuation of a mid-level Chinese city in 1975, which saved the inhabitants from the earthquake. That goal was removed from the NEHRP's mandate in 1990 by non-other than Sen. Al Gore, Jr. (D-Tenn.).

Gore claimed to be motivated by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco: "We've heard the message of the people from Loma Prieta," etc., etc., but he removed forecasting from the objectives, and it has never been put back in, in all the years since. According to a 1990 article in *The Scientist* magazine, Gore's expert Ian Buckle said: "Earthquakes do not kill people, structures do." The original NEHRP act referred "optimistically to the desire to develop 'an operational earthquake prediction system.' But that attitude, fed by a well-publicized 1975 event in which Chinese scientists successfully evacuated a city hours before a major earthquake struck, is no longer held by most scientists."

The March 11 Japan earthquake demonstrated the folly and deadly consequences of such an approach. Japan is one of the best prepared countries in the world to deal with earthquakes, yet the March 11 quake still killed thousands of people. Had a system been available to allow the evacuation of the major population centers hit by the quake, far fewer lives would likely have been lost. Gore and those in the scientific community who have followed his policy approach will be responsible for thousands of deaths that are likely to occur the next time an earthquake of similar magnitude strikes the U.S.

## Deadly Budget Cuts

The NEHRP, which is made up of four agencies, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was created by Congress to coordinate activities among the agencies involved, to implement an earthquake prediction system, develop design and construction methods for earthquake resilience, identify seismic hazards, make model code and land-use recommendations, increase the understanding of earthquake risks, and educate the public about earthquakes.

From FY 2005 to 2009, authorized funding for the program grew from \$166 million to \$192 million a year, but Congressional appropriations actually *fell* from \$127.1 million in 2005 to \$124.5 million in 2009. In FY 2010, Congress appropriated \$131.2 million, but under Obama's proposed 2012 budget, NEHRP's funding is slated to fall to \$121.9 million. This contrasts to the \$330 million per year which the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute estimated was needed to stimulate measurable improvement in the nation's resilience to earthquakes.

Just what this means was presented to the March 10-



FEMA

*Despite the devastation of the Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco in October 1989 (shown here), funding for quake forecasting was eliminated in 1990. Although California is long overdue for a massive quake, the lack of preparedness is a threat to human life.*

11 meeting of the Advisory Committee on Earthquake Hazards Reduction. According to briefing slides posted on its website, the Committee was told that budget reductions are affecting its ability to improve earthquake resilience throughout the country. Mahony, the senior geophysicist in FEMA’s Building Sciences Branch, told the Committee that FEMA’s portion of the program was cut by 13% or \$1.2 million, in FY 2011. California took a 60% hit in risk-based funding, and there were significant cuts for other high risk states as well.

“These reductions will significantly impact the states’ ability to prepare for and mitigate the effects of the next major event,” Mahony said. The FY11 budget problems also mean a loss of four staffing positions. As for FY12, an additional cut of \$1.4 million is anticipated. “This would put FEMA NEHRP back to historic lows in terms of resources and staffing.” The resulting budget of \$6.4 million provides for a staff of just five people.

In fact, in its 2010 annual report, released last May, the advisory committee noted that funding levels have been consistently below Congressional authorizations. “The lack of funding at authorized levels has impacted the activities of all the NEHRP agencies and seriously limited development of the information and tools needed to arrest growth of the potential for catastrophic earthquakes,” the committee reported. “There should

be no doubt that the nation is facing multiple catastrophic earthquakes on the order of those recently seen in China, Italy, Haiti, and Chile. It will take decades of effort to secure this nation against those levels of projected losses and that effort will gain traction only through the work embodied in NEHRP’s strategic plan.”

California Democratic Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein introduced new authorizing legislation on March 17, which appears intended to redress this situation, not only in NEHRP, but in mitigation of all types of natural hazards, at least to some extent. The bill authorizes \$164 million for NEHRP in FY 2011, rising to \$191 million in FY15. Rep. David Wu (D-Ore.), who shepherded an identical bill

through the House last year, applauded the introduction of the Boxer-Feinstein bill, and said it shouldn’t take a natural disaster to get Congress focused on the need for improved earthquake and tsunami monitoring, first responder protocols, and public education about safety procedures. On March 11, the day of the Japan earthquake, Wu sent a letter to the House leadership opposing funding cuts to the agencies involved in natural hazards preparedness and response. “Our constituents, often unknowingly, rely on federal programs when natural disasters occur,” Wu wrote. “Defunding these services comes at much too high a cost.”

Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) has called attention to another example of Obama’s malfeasance, in the case of FEMA’s Disaster Recovery Fund, which is set to run out of money by June, just as hurricane season begins.

In two letters, the first one on Feb. 16, and the second on March 17, which is also signed by a dozen other senators, she asks that Obama submit a supplemental request for the \$1.565 billion needed to cover the costs of recovery projects from past disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) that are currently underway. In her first letter, Landrieu noted that, last year, FEMA was forced to stop making payments for over five months, because it ran out of money. She further reported that in its budget bill passed in February, the House of Representatives de-

cided to include the \$1.565 billion, but paid for it by reducing funding for the Coast Guard, FEMA, and state and local responders' grants.

The second letter was necessitated by the fact that Obama never responded to the first one.

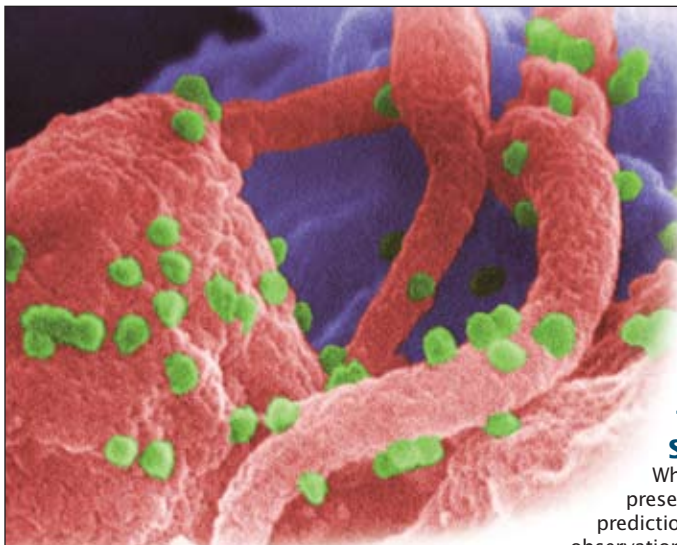
FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate confirmed, in testimony to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on March 30, that the Disaster Recovery Fund will, indeed, start running short of funds in the May-June time period, at which point, FEMA will have to curtail some activities, including hazard mitigation.

### U.S. Engineering Capability Emasculated, Too

The budget story is much the same with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The ACE doesn't play a direct role in earthquake mitigation, but it would play a necessary part in evacuating populations from threatened areas were an earthquake warning system in place. Its capabilities as an engineering agency would be invaluable in terms of mitigation and coastal protection against tsunamis. Debris removal is also a major Corps function after any major disaster, whether it be an earthquake or a hurricane on the Gulf Coast. However,

Obama's FY12 budget proposal cuts the ACE budget by about \$840 million, or 15%, from the FY 2010 appropriated level, bringing it down to the spending levels of about 10 years ago. Funding for the ACE peaked in FY 2010 at about \$5.5 billion, which was the last time Congress actually passed any appropriations. Most of the cuts will be in the ACE construction program, which drops from \$2 billion in FY 2010 to \$1.48 billion in FY 2012, and in the Mississippi River and Flood Control program, which drops to \$210 million in FY 2012, from \$340 million in FY10.

At a March 31 hearing, even members of the Senate Transportation and Infrastructure subcommittee of the Environment and Public Works Committee, did not find the proposed ACE budget credible. Subcommittee chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) characterized the proposals for what the Corps is supposed to do with \$4.6 billion as "vague," and while top Corps officials talk about the problem of aging locks and dams, they had no plan for actually recapitalizing that aging infrastructure. Baucus made clear, however, that there will be no leadership coming from the Congress on this, impotently calling on President Obama to lead, instead.



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