

Opening State of Mark L. Pryor  
Hearing before the Subcommittee on State, Local, and Private Sector Preparedness and  
Integration  
“Earthquake Preparedness: What the United States can Learn from the  
2010 Chilean and Haitian Earthquakes”  
September 30, 2010

I want to start this hearing with a quote:

*“The earthquakes caused the ground to rise and fall - bending the trees until their branches intertwined and opening deep cracks in the ground. Deep seated landslides occurred along the steeper bluffs and hillslides; large areas of land were uplifted permanently; and still larger areas sank and were covered with water that erupted through fissures or craterlets. Huge waves on the Mississippi River overwhelmed many boats and washed others high onto the shore. High banks caved and collapsed into the river; sand bars and points of islands gave way; whole islands disappeared... ”*

This is not a quote from the Book of Revelations or any other chapter of the Bible. It is a quote from the U.S. Geological Survey’s website. This quote described what happened when major earthquakes struck the New Madrid fault in 1811 and 1812.

I want to welcome a very distinguished panel of witnesses here today. Our witnesses have traveled from the far ends of the United States, and in Mr. Cristobal Lira’s case, as far as Chile to address the preparedness of the United States to respond to and recover from a major earthquake. I would like to welcome Mr. Lira and thank him for making the long trip from South America. I want to also recognize the Chilean Ambassador to the United States, Ambassador Arturo Fermandois, who has joined us in the audience today. Welcome to you both and to all of our distinguished witnesses.

Today, the last day of National Preparedness Month, we have invited witnesses who offer very unique perspectives—perspectives that I believe can help inform the efforts of U.S. Government to prepare for and respond to a catastrophic earthquake on American soil.

We have called this diverse group of witnesses because they have taken part in the response to one of two of the most powerful and catastrophic earthquakes in recent memory: the January 12<sup>th</sup> earthquake in Haiti, and the February 27<sup>th</sup> earthquake in Chile. Both of these were similarly

powerful earthquakes; however, the outcome of the two country's response efforts could not have been more disparate.

In Haiti, we saw the worst case scenario; a very poor country with very primitive building codes and minimal response capacity. Some 230,000 people died during the event, and another 300,000 were injured. Over a million people remain homeless. I want to note that we extended an invitation to the Haitian Government to send a representative to testify, but to this day, they are working all hands on deck to recover from January's catastrophe.

A month later, an 8.8 magnitude earthquake struck off the Coast of Chile's Maule region. Seismologists estimate that the earthquake was so powerful that it moved the Earth's figure axis by 2.7 milliarcseconds. Tsunami warnings were issued in 53 countries causing minor damage in San Diego, California, and in Japan. Despite the magnitude of this disaster, the death toll was only 521 victims, most killed by the tsunami.

These events hold extremely valuable lessons for U.S. Government officials working to develop plans for responding to a severe earthquake on American soil. Our goal is to make an American response look more like the results of the 2010 Chilean Earthquake, and less like those of the 2010 Haitian Earthquake.

Many Americans may be tempted to think that the U.S. could never suffer an impact like that experienced in Haiti because of our many resources...but I ask you to remember the days following Hurricane Katrina, and think again.

As we near the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1811 and 1812 New Madrid Earthquakes, we are reminded how critical planning and preparation are to mitigating against loss of life and property. The effects of the New Madrid earthquakes were spread over vast area. Physical damage was reported as far away as Charleston, South Carolina and Washington, DC. In Boston, Massachusetts, which is some 1,000 miles from the epicenter of these earthquakes, church bells rang out from the seismic vibration.

Consider this, a modern major earthquake along the New Madrid fault, which covers seven states, Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Kentucky, Illinois, and Indiana could impact up to 44 million Americans who live in that region, including some 12 million Americans who

live in the highest impact zones. FEMA estimates over \$70 billion in infrastructure damage, while others predict a \$500 billion response and recovery effort. The potential for loss of life, damage to public and private structures, and disruption interstate commerce is staggering.

There is a broad consensus among Government agencies that the possibility of major earthquakes in the New Madrid Seismic Zone remains a concern.

I hope this hearing will provide valuable information for FEMA and other agencies.

Over the past ten years, the United States has seen its share of catastrophes. We watched with horror as the Country was attacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001, we were collectively outraged as we saw the Federal Government fail to provide for its citizens in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and millions of Americans face the impact of floods, fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters each year.

Each one of these tragedies contains valuable lessons. What is not acceptable—what will never be acceptable—is the failure to learn these lessons and to improve each time we are called upon to provide for Americans during their greatest hour of need. I hope this hearing will lead to a more effective response to a major earthquake if and when the time comes.