



Report says B.C. lacks earthquake readiness

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B.C.'s auditor general has for the second time in 17 years criticized the provincial government for not being prepared for a catastrophic earthquake that could claim lives and cost billions of dollars in damage.

The majority of British Columbians may reside in an earthquake hazard area, and the region may be home to or adjacent to thousands of smaller earthquakes annually, but auditor general Russ Jones said in a report released Tuesday that the provincial government has not made it a priority to prepare for the Big One.

Emergency Management B.C. - the Ministry of Justice agency responsible for earthquake preparedness - also came under fire for not disclosing to the public its own lack of preparedness.

As a result, Jones made nine recommendations, addressing issues such as long-term planning and annual public reporting.

"Given the province's current level of preparedness, a sustained commitment by all stakeholders is needed if we are going to minimize the loss of life and other devastating impacts," said Jones.

In fact, a recent Insurance Bureau of Canada report that was cited by Jones estimated a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami off the province's south coast could result in damages totalling \$75 billion.

Attorney General and Minister of Justice Suzanne Anton said Jones's findings weren't a surprise because emergency management officials worked with him while the report was prepared.

"It's a tough report, but a tough report does present an excellent opportunity to me and to government to make sure we move forward on his recommendations," she said.

The government has done a "massive amount of work" on earthquake preparedness, said Anton, noting it has also finished or is completing seismic upgrades to 214 schools and has even changed provincial building codes.

What the provincial government needs to do now is work on what she said is the "big picture," or in other words planning issues.

Kathy Corrigan, the New Democratic public safety critic, disagreed with Anton, saying B.C. is in an earthquake-prone zone, and the government has not taken the issue seriously.

Corrigan said the recent attempt to appoint former Liberal solicitor general John Les to consult about earthquake preparedness now seems like a pre-emptive response to Jones's report.

"I think the only emergency they were prepared for was a political emergency," she said.

Corrigan said an October 2012 magnitude-7.7 earthquake off Alaska's coast that could have caused a tsunami impacting Haida Gwaii should have been considered a "dry run."

An internal Emergency Management B.C. report found the agency didn't have enough experienced personnel to respond to the incident, and their standard operating procedures were inadequate.

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