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ARTICLE

California Is Shaking Again - Why The Next Big One Won't Just Stay In California





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BY PNW STAFF FEBRUARY 03, 2026

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The West Coast is shaking again. In recent weeks, seismic activity along the Pacific Ring of Fire--particularly along California's coastline and inland fault systems--has intensified. What many hoped would be a brief period of tremors has instead become a steady drumbeat of geological reminders that California sits on borrowed time.

In the San Francisco Bay Area alone, hundreds of small earthquakes have been recorded in just days. While most are minor and barely felt, their cumulative effect is unsettling. Earthquakes, unlike hurricanes or wildfires, offer no warning. They arrive without sirens, without forecasts, without mercy. And scientists have been clear for decades: the Big One is not a question of if, but when.

To understand why this matters--far beyond California--we must look honestly at what different earthquake scenarios would actually mean.

HOW MUCH SHOULD I WALK
TO LOSE 45 LBS ACCORDING TO MY AGE?

HEIGHT

5'0"5'1"5'2"5'3"5'4"5'5"

WEIGHT

176200215250260285

GOAL WEIGHT

100108136144154164

AGE

616263646566

| HEIGHT | WEIGHT | 150 | 160 | 170 | 180 | 190 | 200 | 210 |
|--------|--------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 5'0" | | 29 | 31 | 33 | 35 | 37 | 39 | 41 |
| 5'1" | | 28 | 30 | 32 | 34 | 36 | 38 | 40 |
| 5'2" | | 27 | 29 | 31 | 33 | 35 | 37 | 38 |
| 5'3" | | 27 | 28 | 30 | 32 | 34 | 35 | 37 |
| 5'4" | | 26 | 27 | 29 | | | | |
| 5'5" | | 25 | 27 | 28 | | | | |
| 5'6" | | 24 | 26 | 27 | | | | |

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When the Earthquake Is "Manageable"

A magnitude 6.0 to 6.9 earthquake, while considered "strong," would be survivable in many areas due to modern building codes. But survivable does not mean painless.

In this scenario, older buildings--particularly unreinforced masonry structures common in historic districts--would suffer severe damage. Power outages could last days. Gas lines would rupture, sparking fires similar to those that devastated San Francisco in 1906. Hospitals

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When the Big One Hits

A magnitude 7.5 to 7.9 earthquake along the San Andreas Fault is the scenario most seismologists quietly lose sleep over.

In this case, entire neighborhoods could be rendered uninhabitable within minutes. Bridges and overpasses would collapse. Major freeways--lifelines for commerce and emergency response--would be severed. Ports in Los Angeles and Oakland, critical arteries for global trade, could be shut down for months.

Estimates from past studies suggest thousands of deaths, tens of thousands of injuries, and economic losses exceeding \$500 billion. Millions could be displaced overnight.

Communication networks would falter. Cell towers would go down. Internet service would be intermittent or unavailable. In an age where nearly everything--from banking to emergency alerts--depends on connectivity, this alone would amplify chaos.

Temporary shelters would fill immediately. Hotels would be destroyed or unsafe. Rent prices in surrounding states would skyrocket as refugees flee inland. California would not just face homelessness--it would export it.



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The Catastrophic Scenario Few Want to Imagine

A magnitude 8.0+ earthquake, though less frequent, remains within the realm of possibility. In this worst-case scenario, parts of California would resemble a war zone.

Water systems could fail entirely, leaving millions without clean drinking water. Fires could burn unchecked for days. Airports would close. Ports would be crippled. Entire regional economies would freeze.

The cost? Trillions of dollars. The humanitarian impact would rival major global disasters. Federal disaster relief would be stretched to its limits, forcing difficult decisions nationwide.

And that's when the story stops being "about California."

Why the Entire Nation Would Feel It

California is not just another state. If it were its own country, it would rank among the world's largest economies. It produces a massive share of U.S. agriculture, technology, entertainment, manufacturing, and international trade.



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In short, the ground shaking in California would be felt in New York, Texas, Washington, and beyond.

The Uncomfortable Truth

Earthquakes are uniquely cruel disasters. They punish complacency. They do not care about political debates, budgets, or optimism. California has done much to prepare--but preparation does not equal immunity.

The recent surge in seismic activity may amount to nothing more than a geological reminder. Or it may be the prelude to something far larger. No one can say for certain.

But one thing is clear: when the earth moves, denial offers no shelter.

The question is not whether California will face another major earthquake. The question is whether we--as individuals, communities, and a nation--are willing to confront the consequences honestly before the ground forces us to.

Because when the shaking starts, it will already be too late to prepare.

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