

DRAFT for ACEHR review

(Date)

Patrick D. Gallagher
Deputy Director
Office of the Director
National Institute of Standards and Technology
Building 101, Room A1134
100 Bureau Drive
Gaithersburg, MD 20899-1000

Reference: Reauthorization of the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program

Dear Dr. Gallagher:

The National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program (NEHRP), originally authorized by the Congress in 1977, was most recently reauthorized and expanded in 2004. NEHRP has been a stable and productive program for over 25 years and has provided a remarkable series of accomplishments that have allowed the Nation to be better prepared for major earthquakes. The NEHRP is scheduled to be reauthorized by the 111th Congress and we understand that the first hearing will be held this spring.

As your Advisory Committee on Earthquake Hazards Reduction (ACEHR), we meet regularly to advise you and the program's Interagency Coordinating Committee (ICC) on the effectiveness of the program, new trends and developments in the science and engineering of earthquake hazards reduction, and refinements that are needed. In that spirit, we have a number of suggestions for issues that should be addressed during the reauthorization process.

We understand that the reauthorization process is a function of the Legislative Branch and our responsibility to you is within the Executive Branch. We do feel strongly, however, that these changes are needed and hope that the ICC will do what it can to see that they are addressed and implemented. These recommendations are consistent with our most recent annual report to you dated May 2008.

1. Change the Agency responsible for leading post-earthquake investigations to NIST.

Consistent with the change in the leadership of NEHRP, ACEHR recommends that the leadership for post-earthquake investigation be transferred from the USGS to NIST, including the organization and deployment of reconnaissance teams and sponsoring the publication of discipline-oriented interactive media that archive collected data.

2. Add an Interagency Working Group

The NEHRP program is currently comprised of the coordinated activities of four agencies: NIST, FEMA, NSF, and USGS. It is overseen by the ICC with the support of a Program Coordination Working Group (PCWG) comprised of representatives of the four agencies. As the program has matured these past 27 years, numerous other federal agencies have developed programs that parallel NEHRP activities and in some cases overlap. In order to fully utilize the federal resources invested in earthquake hazards reduction, we suggest that an Interagency Working Group (IWG) be formed consisting of other agencies that would work with the PCWG to assure maximum possible coordination and collaboration. The following agencies should be considered for membership.

Department of Homeland Security, Office of Science and Technology
Department of Transportation, Research and Innovative Technology
Administration
Department of Energy
Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Environmental Protection Agency
Army Corps of Engineers

3. Delete designated FEMA funding for Performance-Based Earthquake Engineering

Section 12 of the current Earthquake Hazards Reduction Act, paragraph (a)(8)(E) specifically designates that 10% of the available program funds actually appropriated shall be available to support the development of performance-based guidelines and methodologies. While ACEHR strongly supports this task, we believe funding for it should be at the discretion of the agency so that the available resources can be used in a most efficient and balanced manner.

4. Transfer funding responsibility for the Earthquake Engineering Research Centers from NSF to NIST

The Earthquake Hazards Reduction Act now specifically tasks the National Science Foundation in Section 5, paragraph (b)(4)(B) to support university research consortia and centers for research in geosciences and earthquake engineering. These requirements were consistent with the establishment of four multidisciplinary research centers nationwide that have since “graduated” from the NSF funding program. Since these centers are best suited to provide the multidisciplinary, applied research needed to translate research into practice, their funding should become one of NIST’s responsibilities.

5. Charge NSF with soliciting support from other agencies for the George E. Brown Network for Earthquake Engineering Simulation.

NSF should be tasked to solicit support from other federal agencies to leverage the NSF investments in the George E. Brown, Jr. Network for Earthquake Engineering Simulation (NEES) to address critical research needs for the civil infrastructure. To date, research support for NEES has not matched the levels needed by the earthquake community to reduce earthquake risks significantly and there appears to be significant funding sources outside of NSF.

6. Task USGS to continue the development and sponsorship of multi-hazard demonstration projects.

In 2008, USGS sponsored a very successful multi-hazard demonstration project in southern California that was initially funded by Congress in Fiscal Year (FY) 2007. The demonstration project effectively integrated the earthquake hazards faced by that region with the other natural hazards in a manner that encouraged preparedness and mitigation activities with multiple benefits. USGS should be tasked to expand their scope to include the development of multi-hazard assessments with other high-risk areas.

We appreciate the ICC's aggressive support of the NEHRP and trust that these suggestions will be judged to be reasonable and represent constructive changes to the program. We believe they are consistent with the overarching goals of the NEHRP and will further stimulate more efficient and effective use of the available funds.

Please contact us if you have any questions or wish to further discuss our suggestions.

Sincerely,

Chris D. Poland, Chair
Advisory Committee on Earthquake Hazards Reduction
National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program