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Preparing for the Cascadia earthquake, one shopping trip at a time

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Don Metheny began preparing for the Cascadia earthquake seven years ago when he moved to Florence, the Lane County coastal town facing the double danger of a powerful quake and a devastating tsunami.

He moved to Eugene a year later, but he hasn't stopped preparing for the earthquake that could wreak havoc on the southern Willamette Valley.

A retired engineer and member of the Southeast Neighbors neighborhood association in Eugene, Metheny already has "go-bags" packed for himself and his wife, supplies and water stashed around his home, and more emergency items loaded into the spare-tire compartment of his car. His go-bag is on wheels so he won't have to lug a backpack around after the quake.

"To me it is a matter of spreading it around so something will survive and you can get to it," he said.

If the earthquake levels his home or crushes his car, he's hoping he'll still have emergency supplies at the ready. He even has some gear secured outside in an effort to increase his odds.

Scientists expect the Cascadia subduction zone off the Oregon Coast to produce a massive magnitude 9.0 earthquake, potentially in the near future. The quake will disrupt life throughout Oregon, and help from local, state and federal agencies likely won't be immediate.

State of Oregon emergency managers used to advise Oregonians to be ready to go three days on their own in the case of the Cascadia quake or other major disaster. In recent years that warning stretched to two weeks. Preparing to be self reliant for 14 full days may seem overwhelming and expensive. But, Metheny and others with experience say it can be done.

They recommend buying emergency supplies a little at a time, starting with the essentials (water, food and shelter) and then deciding where to store the items. Truly being two weeks ready requires planning, preparing and reviewing. It's an ongoing effort rather than a one-day or weekend chore.

"You can get there over time," said Cory Grogan, spokesman for the Oregon Office of Emergency Management in Salem. "You don't have to do it all at once."

And the supplies will be useful not just for earthquakes. Ice storms, wildfire and other disasters could all leave people in Lane County on their own, relying on themselves, their emergency supplies and neighbors for a couple of weeks.

A little becomes a lot

An emergency cache starts with one item. It slowly grows from there.

"Take your time," Metheny said. "Save a little bit extra each week. When you go to the grocery store, buy one extra bottle of water. One extra can of food. And just accumulate it over time."

Water tops the list of emergency supplies emphasized by officials. The general recommendation is one gallon of water, per person, per day. The amount accounts for water to drink and water to wash.

In his garage, Metheny has a 55-gallon drum of water. He's added a powder to the water so it will be drinkable for five years. He has also tucked bottles of water in closets around his house, as well as under the kitchen sink. In all, Metheny estimates he has 100 gallons of water stored. That's more than double the 42 gallons experts recommend he should have on hand for his family. He and his wife have a dog, so they've stored water and food for their pet, too.

But, Metheny also is thinking of his neighbors.

"Part of it is preparing for yourself and part of it is preparing for people who are going to need your help," he said. Metheny's stash also includes a water filter recommended to him by a chemist friend.

Food is another essential, and it highlights how people will prepare differently to be self-reliant for half a month.

The food should be nonperishable, either canned or dehydrated, and something pleasing to your palate.

Kelsey Madsen and her partner, Christopher Sharpe, also have been stockpiling food to become two-weeks ready at their Eugene home. She's the administrator for Cascadia Prepared. The Eugene-based nonprofit advocates for better roads and bridges, power lines and communication systems — all to brace for the earthquake.

"It's a lot of things we would buy normally," she said of the emergency food cache. "We just bought them in larger amounts."

The couple purchased much of the food in bulk. Using a vacuum sealer, they've stored up quinoa and dried fruit, among other foods they like to eat. That's important, she said.

"If you don't want to eat it normally, you're not going to want to eat it during a disaster," Madsen said.

When it comes to food, it's also necessary to have a way to open it and a way to heat it up if the food requires cooking. (Dehydrated backpacking meals need boiled water.) Experts recommend having a can opener, camp stove and fuel, as well as a lighter or matches. They remind people not to use camp stoves indoors. The exhaust can be deadly.

Shelter, or protection from the elements, is another essential. The earthquake may make homes unlivable, so having a tent and other camping gear available can be useful. But reliable rain gear, a warm sleeping bag and blankets are other forms of shelter. The earthquake could occur anytime of year, so it may leave Oregonians out in the cold and rain of winter or the heat of summer.

Depending on the individual preparing the emergency supplies, medicines may also be essential and a must-have in emergency supplies.

Metheny said he takes a blood pressure prescription medicine. Each time he picks up his prescription he collects some extra and then rotates it through his go-bag, so he's using the old medicine first and avoiding the pills expiring. It's a chore, but he says it will be worth it if he's having to be on his own for a couple weeks after the earthquake.

Comfort in crisis

The essentials form the foundation for a stockpile of emergency supplies. Then comes handy, but not necessary, items, followed by items purely for comfort after the quake.

Handy items might include aluminum foil for cooking and tarps to help keep things dry or out of the sun. Comfort items might include coffee and a deck of playing cards.

“Once you have those really basic things that you need to ensure that you can stay alive, then you look at the things that you need to be able to help your family recover or to be able to sustain themselves for a longer amount of time,” said Ken Vogeney, emergency manager for the city of Springfield.

Experts often advise people to keep at least a half a tank of gas in their car or truck. The earthquake will likely make fuel supplies scarce. Madsen extends the notion to other items that she wouldn’t want to be caught without for a couple of weeks, chiefly toilet paper and toothpaste.

Carlos Barrera, a board member of the Friendly Area Neighbors neighborhood association, and others deep in the process of preparing for the Cascadia earthquake also mention another small but simple step to be ready. He recommends that people place some sturdy shoes under their bed. If the earthquake hits at night, they might awake to a home turned into an obstacle course of shattered glass and debris.

“There’s going to be a lot of broken glass because of all that shaking,” he said. “It’s going to be breaking windows, causing dishes and everything to fall out of cabinets. Pictures are going to fall off the wall. Your TV may fly across the room.”

Barrera added that work gloves and a hard hat would also be good emergency items to have at the ready, by the bed.

Prepare now, ready later

Firefighters, medics and police officers will be swamped after the Cascadia earthquake. They’ll be busy responding to priority fires, medical emergencies and conducting search and rescues in collapsed buildings. Damaged bridges and roads also will delay response.

So, any emergency supplies prepared now will be invaluable after the quake.

“The reality is that in a disaster as large as we expect Cascadia could be, we are our own first responders in this community and we need to be prepared at an individual level to take care of ourselves, our families and our neighbors until help can arrive,” said Lane County spokeswoman Devon Ashbridge.

County and city emergency managers have encouraged neighborhood associations, businesses and other groups to help people prepare together for the earthquake and other potential disasters.

Knowing now who in the neighborhood is a doctor or nurse, or who has a two-way radio setup, will be valuable after the earthquake.

“Some (of your neighbors) may have skills that will be useful, some of them may have tools or equipment that may be useful during a disaster,” Barrera said. “So people really need to organize and take care of each other during that period of time when emergency services aren’t going to be available.”

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