

SOCIETAL RESPONSE TO AN AMBIGUOUS FOREWARNING:
A CASE STUDY OF THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA UPLIFT¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

In February 1976, southern California residents were first told that a vast uplifted area in the desert northeast of Los Angeles had been discovered. While the precise meaning of the Southern California Uplift (then popularly known as the "Palmdale bulge") remained an anomaly to seismologists, earth scientists admitted that such an uplift could be a precursor to an earthquake. If it were a precursor, its size, (covering approximately 100 miles along the San Andreas Fault) could indicate an earthquake of a magnitude 8 on the Richter scale. Even though the meaning of the Uplift remained uncertain, in April 1976 the California Seismic Safety Commission declared that "the Uplift should be considered a threat to public safety and welfare in the Los Angeles metropolitan area" and encouraged public agencies to review their earthquake preparedness and response plans.

Although no formal prediction had been issued,² this was the first scientifically-based near-prediction or forewarning of a potentially destructive earthquake in the United States. This situation provided a unique opportunity to investigate how communities respond to such forewarnings, what kind of information people remember about them, and what types of preparedness activities these cautions produced.

2. DATA

The data for this report come from five sets of interviews, conducted at approximately six-month intervals between January 1977 and December 1978, with randomly selected residents of Los Angeles County. Each wave of interviews included questions to obtain information about: (1) the saliency