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Central Coast put on 72-hour earthquake alert

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CENTRAL COAST BUREAU

State officials put Monterey County and six other counties on a 72-hour earthquake watch yesterday after a swarm of quakes struck near Parkfield in the southeastern corner of the county.

A quake at 4:25 a.m. measured 4.8 on the Richter scale and was

centered under Middle Mountain, just north of Parkfield, said John Minsch, a seismologist for the U.S. Geological Survey in Golden, Colo.

No injuries or property damage were reported. The quake culminated a series of smaller ones that began Saturday evening.

The state Office of Emergency Services warned that there was a

"significant likelihood" — at least a 37 percent chance — that an earthquake of about magnitude 6 could occur within 72 hours. It said there was a much smaller possibility that a stronger quake of magnitude 7 was possible.

The OES advised agencies in Monterey, Fresno, Kern, Kings, San Benito, Santa Barbara and

San Luis Obispo to activate short-term quake response plans.

Harry Robbins, emergency services planner for Monterey County, said the alert was directed mainly at the area south of Parkfield, where quakes have occurred with regularity. The segment of the fault north of Parkfield has been "relatively benign" for

years, he said.

"We go to a heightened level of readiness, but there aren't any special steps," Robbins said.

Fire departments pulled their engines outdoors as a precaution against collapsing buildings, and police and medical personnel were aware of the advisory, Robbins said.

In 1985, the USGS predicted that an earthquake measuring about 6.0 would rock the Parkfield segment of the San Andreas Fault about January 1988. It could hit up to five years later, in 1993, the USGS said.

Parkfield has recorded earthquakes measuring 5.5 to 6.3 about

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every 22 years since 1857, said USGS spokeswoman Pat Jorgensen in Menlo Park. The most recent 6.0 quake was in 1966.

"Parkfield is science's chance to catch an earthquake in the act. There are instruments up there from all over the world, measuring seismic activity, water levels within the earth, changes in pressure, you name it," Jorgensen said.

Federal, state and local officials and scientists converged on the town to wait. Residents, however, went about their business and dismissed the morning quake as routine.

"Nothing fell off the shelves, no damage. It was mild," said Duane Hamann, 52, a teacher at the one-room Parkfield School.

In his spare time, Hamann adjusts monitoring equipment for scientists.

"Well, nothing special is going on," said Frances Dewey, who lives on a ranch near Parkfield. Other residents telephoned by The Herald also said they were taking no unusual precautions.

Mike Giubbini, manning the California Department of Forestry station at Parkfield, said the CDF was assisting anyone who needed help in preparing for a possible quake. "Mainly, the place is buzzing with reporters," he said.

The 1985 prediction was the first and only long-term quake prediction endorsed by both national and California councils set up to evaluate earthquake predictions.

Within hours after moderate quakes rattled the Parkfield area in 1857, the San Andreas ruptured for some 200 miles southeast to Cajon Pass, producing a great quake measuring about 8 on the Richter scale, according to scientific records.

The Richter scale is a gauge of the energy released by an earth-

quake measured by the ground motion recorded on a seismograph. Every increase of one number on the scale means ground motion is 10 times greater. A quake of magnitude 5 on the Richter scale can cause considerable damage.

The Associated Press also contributed to this report.