

Resolution Seeks Evaluation of Nuclear Blasts on Earthquakes

U.S. Senator Mike Gravel, D-Alaska, last week introduced a Joint Resolution calling for the formation of a Presidential Commission to study and evaluate the relationship between underground nuclear detonations and seismic disturbances.

In a speech to the Senate, the Alaskan Democrat noted earthquake-conscious residents of Alaska, Nevada, and California are concerned at the possible link between underground nuclear testing and earthquakes.

Recent published articles on this subject have "raised a specter



A 6.7 earthquake on the Richter scale hit near Amchitka Island last Wednesday at 10:32 a.m.

"It was a good quake. It scared us all pretty good," said a message from Anchitka.



which may or may not be valid," he said. "An independent inquiry would certainly be a modest, yet responsible answer to the legitimate questions that have been raised."

The National Commission on Nuclear and Seismic Safety would

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Nuclear Disturbances

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consist of fifteen members to be appointed by the President. They would represent various scientific disciplines, including: nuclear physics, geophysics, seismology, hydrology, oceanography, structural engineering, architecture, urban planning, economics, biology, and medicine.

None of the members would be employed by the Federal Government, or by organizations, institutions, or companies under contract with the Government, unless engaged in work not directly related to the functions of the committee.

The Commission would be charged with making a comprehensive investigation of underground detonations in relation to "seismic disturbances-subterranean and marine, ecological contamination and waste, and damage to existing structures."

A full report on the Committee's findings would reach the President within a year, along with a list of recommendations for improving test safety.

Gravel told the Senate that "Alaskans are all too familiar with the horror of earthquakes and giant sea waves."

He recalled the desolation wrought by the massive 1964 quake which snuffed out the lives of 115 Alaskan men, women, and children, and caused a half-billion dollars in property damage.

Underground nuclear tests are conducted by the Atomic Energy Commission at its Nevada test site near Las Vegas. The AEC is planning to conduct tests on Amchitka, a small island near the western tip of the Aleutian Chain.

Both of these locations have been described as "seismically active areas."

Gravel quoted Dr. Kenneth S. Pitzer, President of Stanford

University, a former AEC research director, and Chairman of former President Johnson's Scientific Advisory Committee. On April 14, 1969, Dr. Pitzer had urged that large underground tests in Nevada and the Aleutians be delayed pending an independent inquiry by qualified scientists.

Quoting from Dr. Pitzer's remarks, Gravel said:

"I believe the risk that a damaging earthquake might be triggered deserves a much more substantial public hearing before large tests are held at the new sites in Central Nevada and the Aleutian Island, which are seismically active areas."

Dr. Pitzer said Amchitka merits special attention since it is near one of the earth's "most seismically active regions."

"Inasmuch as earthquake mechanisms are not completely understood," Dr. Pitzer said, "no absolute statements can be made about the possibility of triggering an earthquake of large magnitude in this area."

Gravel said he had read in the AEC's own material that "earthquakes always follow nuclear detonation, that explosions near existing faults are particularly sensitive, and that detonations can produce 'superficial damage,' but that the AEC concludes that where the danger exists it is negligible."

However, Gravel pointed out that those making the judgments are "those most committed to the program." He said that much is unknown about these tests and what they do to earth faults.

"I would think that if we are to err, it should be on the side of prudence, not risk."

Several other Senators from both sides of the aisle will co-sponsor the Gravel Resolution.