

February 12, 2009

Inspector General Todd J. Zinser
Office of Inspector General
Department of Commerce
Herbert Clark Hoover Building
14th Street & Constitution Ave., NW
Room 7898C
Washington DC 20230

RE: Request for Investigation

Dear General Zinser:

I am writing on behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) to request that your office look into delays in deploying a vital seismic network in the Hawaiian Islands and why National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) officials have been inaccurately representing that this network has already been completed.

In official briefings (see Attachment I), NOAA officials tout the Hawaii seismic network upgrade as a top priority and a key element in improving its tsunami warning program and claim that all of the planned monitoring stations were operational as of march 2008.

Yet a January 31, 2009 agency status report (Attachment II) reveals that:

- Only “5 of 13 broadband + strong motion stations complete and operational”; and
- Only “8 of 15 strong motion stations complete and operational”.

The status report concludes that:

“Insufficient staffing, budget uncertainties, and bureaucratic delays have contributed to slow progress. The current situation of responsibility without authority leads to frustration, hampers decision-making, and ultimately endangers the project.”

Among the problems cited are –

- Allocated funds were spent elsewhere. “A recent inquiry into the matter has shown that much of the allotted \$125k FY08 funds vanished”;
- New hardware but no staff trained to use it. NOAA “purchased expensive, state-of-the-art seismic equipment and processing software, but it did not plan for formal training of its staff to fully realize the new systems’ capabilities”; and

- Bureaucratic red tape has blocked needed property leases and “communications to acquire data from field sites back to” the central analysis center.

The Hawaiian Islands sit atop one of the most seismically active areas on the globe. The network is supposed to increase the reliability and speed of warnings for tsunamis. As a result of the delays, local tsunami warnings for Hawaii are compromised.

PEER is asking the Inspector General to not only look into the missing funds and logistical snafus but also why NOAA officials are representing that the project was completed when it was less than half done.

If your office would like more information about this request, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Jeff Ruch
Executive Director