

EARTHQUAKE!

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“Only fools, charlatans and liars predict earthquakes,” quipped the late Charles Richter, who knew enough about nature’s ultimate upheavals to intent the scale by which they are measured.

Prediction is the siren song of earthquake studies--the alluring problem on which reputations can be won or wrecked. Not just careers, but millions of lives and billions of dollars hang on the ability of scientists to say just when and where the earth will move.

NOVA looks at the high-stakes quest to predict quakes on “Earthquake!”

In California, the North American plate is slipping past the Pacific plate at a boundary called the San Andreas Fault. The earth moves in fits and starts. In 1906, the start equaled about 8 on Richter’s scale, and, together with the fire that followed it, wrecked the city of San Francisco. In October 1989, the Bay Area quake registered 7.1--nearly 10 times weaker, but powerful enough to cause 61 deaths and billions of dollars in damage.

Alann Lindh of the US geological Survey (USGS) asks the question: “Will there be some period, lasting hours to days, before the earthquake during which the fault will start to do something that we’ll be able to see and identify routinely?”

Seeking evidence for just such forebodings, Lindh and his colleagues have set up one of the largest earthquake experiments in the world. The laboratory is a section of the San Andreas Fault in central California, where moderate quakes occur with near clockwork frequency--about every two decades. The last quake was 1966. Geoscientists are ready to record the next, which is already overdue, with a battery of instruments that will give an unprecedented portrait of the before, during and after of an earthquake.

But no one knows whether the data will turn up a magic key to prediction--or if there is a key.

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CREDITS

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