CALIFORNIA GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATING THE HAZARD OF SURFACE FAULT RUPTURE

NOTE 49

GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATING THE HAZARD OF SURFACE FAULT RUPTURE
(Similar guidelines were adopted by the State Mining and Geology Board for advisory purposes in 1996.)

These guidelines are to assist geologists who investigate faults relative to the hazard of surface fault rupture. Subsequent to the passage of the Alquist-Priolo Earthquake Fault Zoning Act (1972), it became apparent that many fault investigations conducted in California were incomplete or otherwise inadequate for the purpose of evaluating the potential of surface fault rupture. It was further apparent that statewide standards for investigating faults would be beneficial. These guidelines were initially prepared in 1975 and have been revised several times since then.

The investigation of sites for the possible hazard of surface fault rupture is a deceptively difficult geologic task. Many active faults are complex, consisting of multiple breaks. Yet the evidence for identifying active fault traces is generally subtle or obscure and the distinction between recently active and long-inactive faults may be difficult to make. It is impractical from an economic, engineering, and architectural point of view to design a structure to withstand serious damage under the stress of surface fault rupture. Once a structure is sited astride an active fault, the resulting fault-rupture hazard cannot be mitigated unless the structure is relocated, whereas when a structure is placed on a landslide, the potential hazard from landsliding often can be mitigated. Most surface faulting is confined to a relatively narrow zone a few feet to few tens of feet wide, making avoidance (i.e., building setbacks) the most appropriate mitigation method. However, in some cases primary fault rupture along branch faults can be distributed across zones hundreds of feet wide or manifested as broad warps, suggesting that engineering strengthening or design may be of additional mitigative value (e.g., Lazarte and others, 1994).

No single investigative method will be the best, or even useful, at all sites, because of the complexity of evaluating surface and near surface faults and because of the infinite variety of site conditions. Nonetheless, certain investigative methods are more helpful than others in locating faults and evaluating the recency of activity.

The evaluation of a given site with regard to the potential hazard of surface fault rupture is based extensively on the concepts of recency and recurrence of faulting along existing faults. In a general way, the more recent the faulting the greater the probability for future faulting (Allen, 1975). Stated another way, faults of known historic activity during the last 200 years, as a class, have a greater probability for future activity than faults classified as Holocene age (last 11,000 years), and a much greater probability of future activity than faults classified as Quaternary age (last 1.6 million years). However, it should be kept in mind that certain faults have recurrent activity measured in tens or hundreds of years whereas other faults may be inactive for thousands of years before being reactivated. Other faults may be characterized by creep-type rupture that is more or less ongoing. The magnitude, sense, and nature of fault rupture also vary for different faults or even along different strands of the same fault. Even so, future faulting generally is expected to recur along pre-existing faults (Bonilla, 1970). The development of a new fault or reactivation of a long-inactive fault is relatively uncommon and generally need not be a concern in site development.

As a practical matter, fault investigation should be directed at the problem of locating existing faults and then attempting to evaluate the recency of their activity. Data should be obtained both from the site and outside the site area. The most useful and direct method of evaluating recency is to observe (in a trench or road cut) the youngest geologic unit faulted and the oldest unit that is not faulted. Even so, active faults may be subtle or discontinuous and consequently overlooked in trench exposures (Bonilla and Lienkaemper, 1991). Therefore, careful logging is essential and trenching needs to be conducted in conjunction with other methods. For example, recently active faults may also be identified by direct observation of young, fault-related geomorphic (i.e., topographic) features in the field or on aerial photographs. Other indirect and more interpretive methods are identified in the outline below. Some of these methods are discussed in Bonilla (1982), Carver and McCalpin (1996), Hatheway and Leighton (1979), McCalpin (1996a, b, c), National Research Council (1986), Sherard and others (1974), Slemmons (1977), Slemmons and dePolo (1986), Taylor and Cluff (1973), the Utah Section of the Association of Engineering Geologists (1987), Wallace (1977), Weldon and others (1996), and Yeats and others (1997). McCalpin (1996b) contains a particularly useful discussion of various field techniques. Many other useful references are listed in the bibliographies of the references cited here.

The purpose, scope, and methods of investigation for fault investigations will vary depending on conditions at specific sites and the nature of the projects. Contents and scope of the investigation may also vary based on guidelines and review criteria of agencies or political organizations having regulatory responsibility. However, there are topics that should be considered in all comprehensive

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fault investigations and geologic reports on faults. For a given site some topics may be addressed in more detail than at other sites because of the difference in the geologic and/or tectonic setting and/or site conditions. These investigative considerations should apply to any comprehensive fault investigation and may be applied to any project site, large or small. Suggested topics, considerations, and guidelines for fault investigations and reports on faults are provided in the following annotated outline. Fault investigations may be conducted in conjunction with other geologic and geotechnical investigations (DMG Notes 42 and 44). Although not all investigative techniques need to be or can be employed in evaluating a given site, the outline provides a checklist for preparing complete and well-documented reports. Most reports on fault investigations are reviewed by local or state government agencies. Therefore it is necessary that the reports be documented adequately and written carefully to facilitate that review. The importance of the review process is emphasized here, because it is the reviewer who must evaluate the adequacy of reports, interpret or set standards where they are unclear, and advise the governing agency as to their acceptability (Hart and Williams, 1978; DMG Note 41).

The scope of the investigation is dependent not only on the complexity and economics of a project, but also on the level of risk acceptable for the proposed structure or development. A more detailed investigation should be made for hospitals, high-rise buildings, and other critical or sensitive structures than for low-occupancy structures such as wood-frame dwellings that are comparatively safe. The conclusion drawn from any given set of data, however, must be consistent and unbiased. Recommendations must be clearly separated from conclusions, because recommendations are not totally dependent on geologic factors. The final decision as to whether, or how, a given project should be developed lies in the hands of the owner and the governing body that must review and approve the project.

CONTENTS OF GEOLOGIC REPORTS ON FAULTS

Suggested topics, considerations, and guidelines for investigations and reports

The following topics should be considered and addressed in detail where essential to support opinions, conclusions, and recommendations, in any geologic report on faults. It is not expected that all the topics or investigative methods would be necessary in a single investigation. In specific cases it may be necessary to extend some of the investigative methods well beyond the site or property being investigated. Particularly helpful references are cited parenthetically below.

I. Text

A. Purpose and scope of investigation; description of proposed development.

B. Geologic and tectonic setting. Include seismicity and earthquake history.

C. Site description and conditions, including dates of site visits and observations. Include information on geo logic units, graded and filled areas, vegetation, existing structures, and other factors that may affect the choice of investigative methods and interpretation of data.

D. Methods of investigation.

1. Review of published and unpublished literature, maps, and records concerning geologic units, faults, ground-water barriers, and other factors.

2. Stereoscopic interpretation of aerial photographs and other remotely sensed images to detect fault-related topography (geomorphic features), vegetation and soil contrasts, and other lineaments of possible fault origin. The area interpreted usually should extend beyond the site boundaries.

3. Surface observations, including mapping of geologic and soil units, geologic structures, geomorphic features and surfaces, springs, deformation of engineered structures due to fault creep, both on and beyond the site.

4. Subsurface investigations.

   a. Trenching and other excavations to permit detailed and direct observation of continuously exposed geologic units, soils, and structures; must be of adequate depth and be carefully logged (Taylor and Cluff, 1973; Hatheway and Leighton, 1979; McCalpin, 1996b).

   b. Borings and test pits to permit collection of data on geologic units and ground water at specific locations. Data points must be sufficient in number and spaced adequately to permit valid correlations and interpretations.

   c. Cone penetrometer testing (CPT) (Grant and others, 1997; Edelman and others, 1996). CPT must be done in conjunction with continuously logged borings to correlate CPT results with on-site materials. The number of borings and spacing of CPT soundings should be sufficient to adequately image site stratigraphy. The existence and location of a fault based on CPT data are interpretative.

5. Geophysical investigations. These are indirect methods that require a knowledge of specific geo logic conditions for reliable interpretations. They should seldom, if ever, be employed alone without knowledge of the geology (Chase and Chapman, 1976). Geophysical methods alone never prove the absence of a fault nor do they identify the recency of activity. The types of equipment and techniques used should be described and supporting data presented (California Board of Registration for Geologists and Geophysicists, 1993).

   a. High resolution seismic reflection (Stephenson and others, 1995; McCalpin, 1996b).

   b. Ground penetrating radar (Cai and others, 1996).

   c. Other methods include: seismic refraction, magnetic profiling, electrical resistivity, and gravity (McCalpin, 1996b).

6. Age-dating techniques are essential for determining the ages of geologic units, soils, and surfaces that bracket the time(s) of faulting (Pierce, 1986; Birkeland and other, 1991; Rutter and Catto, 1995; McCalpin, 1996a).

   a. Radiometric dating (especially 14C).

   b. Soil-profile development.

c. Rock and mineral weathering.

d. Landform development.

e. Stratigraphic correlation of rocks/minerals/fossils.

f. Other methods — artifacts, historical records, tephrochronology, fault scarp modeling, thermoluminescence, lichenometery, paleomagnetism, dendrochronology, etc.

7. Other methods should be included when special conditions permit or requirements for critical structures demand a more intensive investigation.

a. Aerial reconnaissance overflights.

b. Geodetic and strain measurements.

c. Microseismicity monitoring.

E. Conclusions.

1. Location and existence (or absence) of hazardous faults on or adjacent to the site; ages of past rupture events.

2. Type of faults and nature of anticipated offset, including sense and magnitude of displacement, if possible.

3. Distribution of primary and secondary faulting (fault zone width) and fault-related deformation.

4. Probability of or relative potential for future surface displacement. The likelihood of future ground rupture seldom can be stated mathematically, but may be stated in semiquantitative terms such as low, moderate, or high, or in terms of slip rates determined for specific fault segments.

5. Degree of confidence in and limitations of data and conclusions.

F. Recommendations.

1. Setback distances of proposed structures from hazardous faults. The setback distance generally will depend on the quality of data and type and complexity of fault(s) encountered at the site. In order to establish an appropriate setback distance from a fault located by indirect or interpretative methods (e.g., borings or cone penetrometer testing), the area between data points also should be considered underlain by a fault unless additional data are used to more precisely locate the fault. State and local regulations may dictate minimum distances (e.g., Section 3603 of California Code of Regulations in Appendix B in Hart and Bryant, 1997).

2. Additional measures (e.g., strengthened foundations, engineering design, flexible utility connections) to accommodate warping and distributive deformation associated with faulting (Lazarte and others, 1994).

3. Risk evaluation relative to the proposed development.

4. Limitations of the investigation; need for additional studies.

II. References.

A. Literature and records cited or reviewed; citations should be complete.

B. Aerial photographs or images interpreted — list type, data, scale, source, and index numbers.

C. Other sources of information, including well records, personal communications, and other data sources.

III. Illustrations — these are essential to the understanding of the report and to reduce the length of text.

A. Location map — identify site locality, significant faults, geographic features, regional geology, seismic epicenters, and other pertinent data; 1:24,000 scale is recommended. If the site investigation is done in compliance with the Alquist-Priolo Act, show site location on the appropriate Official Map of Earthquake Fault Zones.

B. Site development map — show site boundaries, existing and proposed structures, graded areas, streets, exploratory trenches, borings geophysical traverses, locations of faults, and other data; recommended scale is 1:2,400 (1 inch equals 200 feet), or larger.

C. Geologic map — show distribution of geologic units (if more than one), faults and other structures, geomorphic features, aerial photo graphic lineaments, and springs; on topographic map 1:24,000 scale or larger; can be combined with III(A) or III(B).

D. Geologic cross sections, if needed, to provide three-dimensional picture.

E. Logs of exploratory trenches and borings — show details of observed features and conditions; should not be generalized or diagrammatic. Trench logs should show topographic profile and geologic structure at a 1:1 horizontal to vertical scale; scale should be 1:60 (1 inch = 5 feet) or larger.

F. Geophysical data and geologic interpretations.

IV. Appendix: Supporting data not included above (e.g., water well data, photographs, aerial photographs).

V. Authentication: Investigating geologist's signature and registration number with expiration data.

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* DMG Note 41 — General guidelines for reviewing geologic reports, 1998.

* DMG Note 42 — Guidelines for geologic/seismic reports, 1986.

* DMG Note 44 — Recommended guidelines for preparing engineering geologic reports, 1986.

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