

## Seismologist calls quake-reporting system ineffective

By CARLOS GALARZA  
Of The STAR Staff

The island's earthquake-tracking system is woefully outdated and operating at less than one-third its capacity, a seismologist said Thursday.

A \$6 million, four-year program to update the system and improve earthquake-readiness was sent to the Legislature last year where it lies dormant, said William McCann, director of the seismic network headquartered at the University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez campus.

McCann said only six of 21 seismic tracking stations are functioning. These unmanned-remote stations pick up earth movements and relay the radio signals to the San Juan Geophysical Observatory in Cayey, where the information is recorded by the U.S. Geological Survey.

"There's no doubt tremors are going unrecorded," McCann said. "In June of last year an earthquake that measured about a three [on the Richter scale] was registered in Cabo Rojo and we couldn't locate it."

He said it's important to have a tracking system that will locate not only big earthquakes, but also smaller ones that tell geologists where there may be faults.

"In the case of the seismic network, we are not prepared if an earthquake hits Puerto Rico," McCann added.

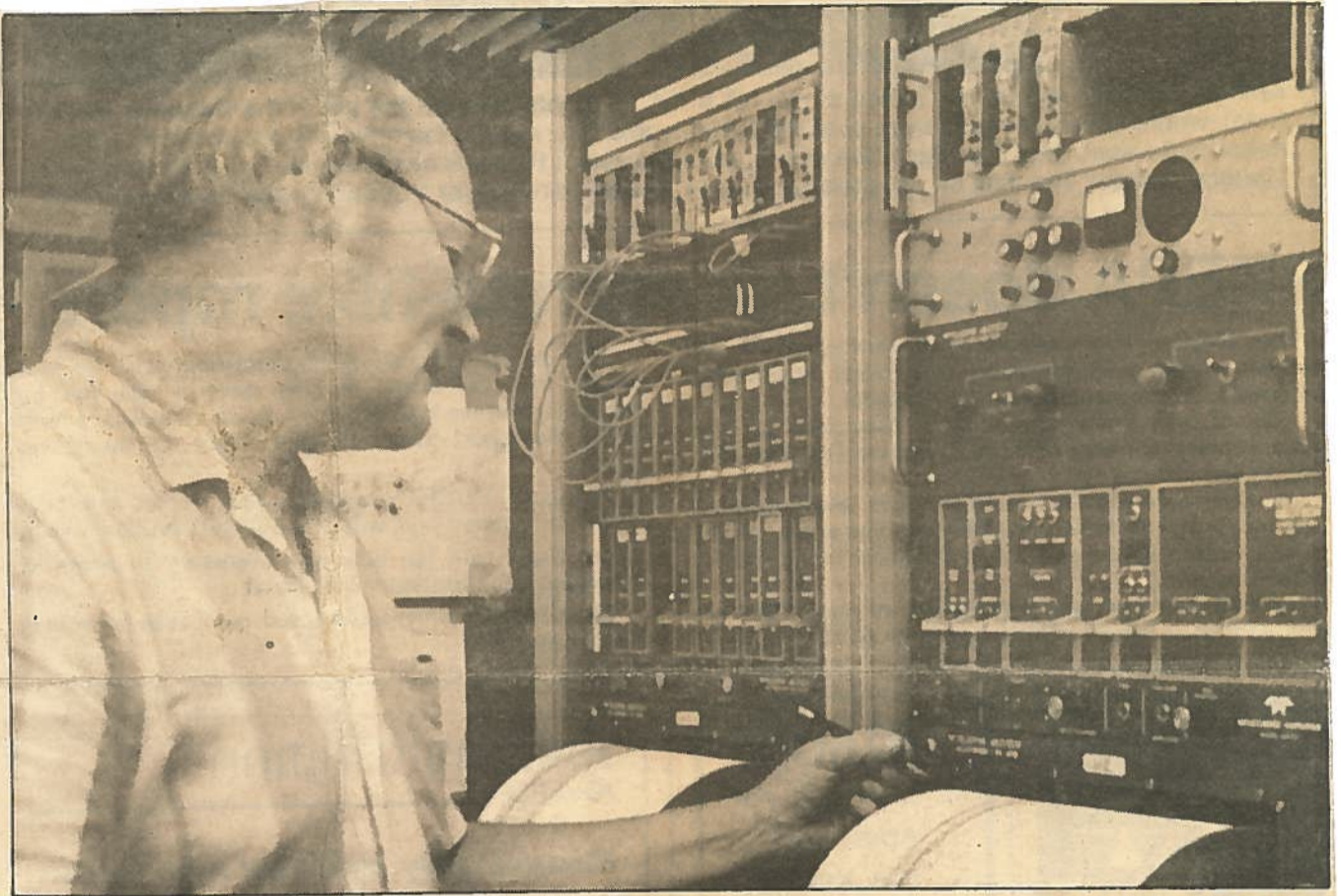
His comments contradicted Gov. Hernández Colón's claim Wednesday that Puerto Rico is prepared should a temblor jolt the island.

The governor said the island's building code has been revised to take earthquakes into account and that the government's emergency plans have also been updated.

La Fortaleza also circulated what it called its official earthquake emergency plan. However, the 20-page directive turned out to be a general plan that defines the role of 25 government agencies and public corporations in case of disasters.

Some members of the Earthquake Safety Commission, which was established through an executive order signed by the governor June 23, 1988, said the government's general emergency plan does not go far enough in dealing with earthquakes.

McCann, a member of the commission, said the government has failed to instruct the public on what to do



STAR photo by Pipo Grajales

Terry Hardiman checks earth movement at the San Juan Geophysical Observatory in Cayey, where the information is recorded by the U.S. Geological Survey.

when an earthquake strikes.

Commission Chairman Leandro Rodríguez Agrait has also emphasized that Puerto Ricans must be told how to contend with an earthquake.

McCann said having a reliable seismic tracking system is essential.

"[The seismic network] has the responsibility of locating earthquakes, determining their magnitude, warning of a possible tsunami [tidal waves] and informing the government on the extent of damage," he said. "If power is knocked out we would have no way of locating the earthquake."

The Commonwealth set up the seismic network in the 1970s to check the viability of having a nuclear plant on the island. When that idea was discarded, the network was abandoned. It was revived by the University of Puerto Rico for scientific investigations.

Terry Hardiman, director of the U.S. Geophysical Observatory in Cayey, said the seismic network equipment used on the island in the '70s was new but not state-of-the-art.

"It wouldn't make sense to put the remote stations back in operation by using the same equipment," Hardiman said. "It's just too outdated."

McCann said a state-of-the-art seismic tracking system would employ a satellite and computers. He said such equipment is beyond the reach of the seismic network's \$75,000 annual budget allotted by UPR.

Geologists have said Puerto Rico could be due for a damaging earthquake, noting that records show a major quake takes place every 50 to 100 years on the island.

Seventy-one years have passed since the Oct. 11, 1918, quake that rocked the northwestern corner of Puerto Rico and claimed 116 lives.