



Press release

Date

Friday, 4 July 2014

Embargo

4 July, 2 pm

Federal authorities launch natural hazards portal for the general public

Information about the current natural hazard situation in Switzerland can now be obtained at a glance from an easy-to-read map on the new web portal www.natural-hazards.ch. The federal agencies responsible for natural hazards were commissioned by the Federal Council to develop the joint web portal, which marks a further advance in the improvement of natural hazard warnings in Switzerland.

Up to now, if you wanted to know whether you could travel without difficulty from your home to your holiday house on a stormy winter's day with heavy downpours, you had to gather information separately from MeteoSwiss, the FOEN and the SLF. The web portal www.natural-hazards.ch, which is jointly operated by the federal natural hazard agencies, now presents information about the natural hazard situation on a single and easy-to-read map, which indicates extreme weather conditions, floods and landslides, earthquakes, avalanches, and the threat of forest fires. The map content is complemented by recommendations on behaviour before, during and after natural hazard events. In the event of particularly critical situations, the natural hazards bulletin provides more detailed information and a joint situation report. Background and in-depth information can also still be found on the web pages of the individual agencies.

Federal authorities improve measures in the area of natural hazards

According to Bruno Oberle, Director of the Federal Office for the Environment FOEN, natural hazard events like floods cannot be prevented; however, their consequences can be alleviated. The aim of the new web portal is to provide solid information for the public as "people can only act responsibly on an individual level and, in this way, avoid or reduce damage, if they are well informed." Since the floods of 2005, the federal authorities have implemented different measures in the area of natural hazards in cooperation with the cantons and communes. For example, the alert and

warning system was further developed, e.g. through the development of information systems for experts and training of local natural hazard consultants. The public natural hazards portal represents another milestone in the implementation of the OWARNA report on the “Optimisation of early warning and alerting of natural hazards”.

Peter Binder, Director of the Federal Office of Meteorology MeteoSwiss highlights the fact that the web portal is available in German, French and Italian, for basic information in English, and is also designed for use by the visually impaired: “When we provide warnings about the threat of major natural events on the radio and television, reference is made to www.naturgefahren.ch. Therefore, it is essential that the information there is accessible to all.” The user-friendliness and clarity of the portal have been tested rigorously and optimised over a series of development phases. And because more and more people are accessing the internet using smart phones, a version of the portal is also available that has been optimised for mobile devices.

Cooperation between the agencies

Christoph Hegg, Deputy Director of the WSL Institute for Snow and Landscape Research SLF, says that joint products like maps can only be offered on a shared portal if the cooperation between the agencies involved works well. “The portal provides visible proof of how the federal natural hazard agencies – FOEN, MeteoSwiss, SED, SLF-WSL and FOCP – have formalised and optimised their cooperation.” During critical situations, the participating agencies coordinate their forecasts and warnings through the Specialist Natural Hazards Staff and issue joint natural hazard bulletins and press releases which are also published on the new natural hazards portal.

It is not usually possible to provide advance warning of earthquakes. Hence, as noted by Stefan Wiemer, Director of the Swiss Seismological Service, reliable information about earthquake intensity, the possible impacts and recommended behaviour is all the more important in the case of such events: “During the chaotic phase in the immediate aftermath of a major earthquake, it is crucial that the panic-stricken population have access to reliable, comprehensive and rapidly available information.” And because cold and rain, for example, can exacerbate the difficulties faced by evacuated or homeless earthquake victims, it makes sense to present earthquake reports in the context of the overall natural hazard situation.

In-depth information

Warnings and information about natural hazard events are still published on the websites of the relevant individual agencies. As is the case up to now, these websites provide detailed background information like measurement data, scientific content and warnings for specific user groups like farmers, canoeists, sailors and ski tourers. In contrast, the federal authorities’ natural hazards portal is aimed at the general public. For this reason, the Federal Office for Civil Protection also contributes to the portal at background level. “As the coordinating agency in the area of civil protection, the FOCP supports all measures that strengthen and improve the cooperation between the participating partners. The natural hazards portal is a prime

example of successful cooperation between different authorities,” explains Christoph Flury, Deputy Director of the FOCP.

Box:

www.natural-hazards.ch

FOEN – Federal Office for the Environment; www.bafu.admin.ch

MeteoSwiss – Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology; www.meteoswiss.ch

SLF – WSL Institute for Snow and Landscape Research SLF; www.slf.ch

SED – Swiss Seismological Service; www.seismo.ethz.ch

FOCP – Federal Office for Civil Protection, www.babs.admin.ch

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Enclosures

Visual material

- Screenshot of the portal
- Fact sheet
- Photographs press conference

Internet

- www.natural-hazards.ch
- OWARNA report in German:
<http://www.news.admin.ch/NSBSubscriber/message/attachments/19198.pdf>
- OWARNA report in French:
<http://www.news.admin.ch/NSBSubscriber/message/attachments/19185.pdf>