

**Basic Seismological Characterization  
for  
Weston County, Wyoming**

by

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**BACKGROUND**

Seismological characterizations of an area can range from an analysis of historic seismicity to a long-term probabilistic seismic hazard assessment. A complete characterization usually includes a summary of historic seismicity, an analysis of the Seismic Zone Map of the Uniform Building Code, deterministic analyses on active faults, “floating earthquake” analyses, and short- or long-term probabilistic seismic hazard analyses.

Presented below, for Weston County, Wyoming, are an analysis of historic seismicity, an analysis of the Uniform Building Code, deterministic analyses of nearby active faults, an analysis of the maximum credible “floating earthquake”, and current short- and long-term probabilistic seismic hazard analyses.

**Historic Seismicity in Weston County**

The enclosed map of “Earthquake Epicenters and Suspected Active Faults with Surficial Expression in Wyoming” (Case and others, 1997) shows the historic distribution of earthquakes in Wyoming. One intensity III or greater earthquake has been recorded in Weston County. This earthquake is discussed below.

The only reported earthquake in Weston County occurred near Osage on May 1, 1926, about 15 miles north-northwest of Newcastle. Several individuals felt this earthquake as an intensity IV event, and there were reports of dishes shifting and objects moving (Neumann, 1928).

## **Regional Historic Seismicity**

Four earthquakes have also occurred near Weston County. One of the first recorded earthquakes in northeastern Wyoming occurred near Sundance on February 3, 1897. The intensity IV-V earthquake severely shook the Shoher School on Little Houston Creek southwest of Sundance. Many residents of Sundance reported hearing three loud reports resembling the explosion of a boiler or a great blast. (Sundance Gazette, February 5, 1897).

On February 18, 1972, a magnitude 4.3 earthquake was recorded approximately 28 miles northwest of Upton. No damage was reported.

On February 24, 1993, a magnitude 3.6 earthquake occurred in southeastern Campbell County approximately 43 miles southwest of Upton. No damage was reported.

Most recently, on February 6, 1996, a magnitude 3.7, intensity V earthquake was recorded near Hill City, South Dakota. Residents living twenty-two miles north of Newcastle reported that dishes were shaken off a shelf (Wyoming State Geological Survey press release, February 6, 1996).

## **Uniform Building Code**

The Uniform Building Code (UBC) is a document prepared by the International Conference of Building Officials. Its stated intent is to “provide minimum standards to safeguard life or limb, health, property, and public welfare by regulating and controlling the design, construction, quality of materials, use and occupancy, location and maintenance of all buildings and structures within this jurisdiction and certain equipment specifically regulated herein.”

The UBC contains information and guidance on designing buildings and structures to withstand seismic events. With safety in mind, the UBC provides Seismic Zone Maps to help identify which design factors are critical to specific areas of the country. In addition, depending upon the type of building, there is also an “importance factor”. The “importance factor” can, in effect, raise the standards that are applied to a building.

The current UBC Seismic Zone Map (Figure 1) (1997) has five seismic zones, ranging from Zone 0 to Zone 4, as can be seen on the enclosed map. The seismic zones are in part defined by the probability of having a certain level of ground shaking (horizontal acceleration) in 50 years. The criteria used for defining boundaries on the Seismic Zone Map were established by the Seismology Committee of the Structural Engineers Association of California (Building Standards, September-October, 1986). The criteria they developed are as follows:



**Figure 1.** UBC Seismic Zone Map.

Zone    Effective Peak Acceleration, % gravity (g)

4	30% and greater
3	20% to less than 30%
2	10% to less than 20%
1	5% to less than 10%
0	less than 5%

The committee assumed that there was a 90% probability that the above values would not be exceeded in 50 years, or a 100% probability that the values would be exceeded in 475 to 500 years.

Weston County is in Seismic Zones 0 and 1 of the UBC. Since effective peak accelerations (90% chance of non-exceedance in 50 years) can range from 0%-10%g in these zones, and there has been some significant historic seismicity in the county, it may be reasonable to assume that an average peak acceleration of 5.0%g could be applied to the design of a non-critical facility located in the county if only the UBC were used. Such an acceleration, however, is significantly less than would be suggested through newer building codes.

Recently, the UBC has been replaced by the International Building Code (IBC). The IBC is based upon probabilistic analyses, which are described in a following section. Weston County still uses the UBC, however, as do most Wyoming counties as of January 2003.

### **Deterministic Analysis Of Regional Active Faults With A Surficial Expression**

There are no known exposed active faults with a surficial expression in or around Weston County. As a result, no fault-specific analysis can be generated for Weston County.

### **Floating or Random Earthquake Sources**

Many federal regulations require an analysis of the earthquake potential in areas where active faults are not exposed, and where earthquakes are tied to buried faults with no surface expression. Regions with a uniform potential for the occurrence of such earthquakes are called tectonic provinces. Within a tectonic province, earthquakes associated with buried faults are assumed to occur randomly, and as a result can theoretically occur anywhere within that area of uniform earthquake potential. In reality, that random distribution may not be the case, as all earthquakes are associated with specific faults. If all buried faults have not been identified, however, the distribution has to be considered random. "Floating earthquakes" are earthquakes that are considered to occur randomly in a tectonic province.

It is difficult to accurately define tectonic provinces when there is a limited historic earthquake record. When there are no nearby seismic stations that can detect small-magnitude earthquakes, which occur more frequently than larger events, the problem is compounded. Under these conditions, it is common to delineate larger, rather than smaller, tectonic provinces.

The U.S. Geological Survey identified tectonic provinces in a report titled “Probabilistic Estimates of Maximum Acceleration and Velocity in Rock in the Contiguous United States” (Algermissen and others, 1982). In that report, Weston County was roughly classified as being in the “Faulted Laramide-Age Mountain Uplift” tectonic province. That province was assigned a “floating earthquake” with a maximum magnitude of 6.1. Geomatrix (1988b) suggested using a more extensive regional tectonic province, called the “Wyoming Foreland Structural Province”, which is approximately defined by the Idaho-Wyoming Thrust Belt on the west, 104° West longitude on the east, 40° North latitude on the south, and 45° North latitude on the north. Geomatrix (1988b) estimated that the largest “floating” earthquake in the “Wyoming Foreland Structural Province” would have a magnitude in the 6.0 – 6.5 range, with an average value of magnitude 6.25.

Federal or state regulations usually specify if a “floating earthquake” or tectonic province analysis is required for a facility. Usually, those regulations also specify at what distance a floating earthquake is to be placed from a facility. For example, for uranium mill tailings sites, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission requires that a floating earthquake be placed 15 kilometers from the site. That earthquake is then used to determine what horizontal accelerations may occur at the site. A magnitude 6.25 “floating” earthquake, placed 15 kilometers from any structure in Weston County, would generate horizontal accelerations of approximately 15%g at the site. That acceleration would be adequate for designing a uranium mill tailings site, but may be too large for less critical sites, such as a landfill. Critical facilities, such as dams, usually require a more detailed probabilistic analysis of random earthquakes. Based upon probabilistic analyses of random earthquakes in an area distant from exposed active faults (Geomatrix, 1988b), however, placing a magnitude 6.25 earthquake at 15 kilometers from a site will provide a fairly conservative estimate of design ground accelerations.

### **Probabilistic Seismic Hazard Analyses**

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) publishes probabilistic acceleration maps for 500-, 1000-, and 2,500-year time frames. The maps show what accelerations may be met or exceeded in those time frames by expressing the probability that the accelerations will be met or exceeded in a shorter time frame. For example, a 10% probability that an acceleration may be met or exceeded in 50 years is roughly equivalent to a 100% probability of exceedance in 500 years.

The USGS has recently generated new probabilistic acceleration maps for Wyoming (Case, 2000). Copies of the 500-year (10% probability of exceedance in 50 years), 1000-year (5% probability of exceedance in 50 years), and 2,500-year (2% probability of exceedance in 50 years) maps are attached. Until recently, the 500-year map was often used for planning purposes for average structures, and was the basis of the most current Uniform Building Code. The new International Building Code, however, uses a 2,500-year map as the basis for building design. The attached maps reflect current perceptions on seismicity in Wyoming. In many areas of Wyoming, ground accelerations shown on the USGS maps can be increased due to local soil conditions. For example, if fairly soft, saturated sediments are present at the surface, and seismic waves are passed through them, surface ground accelerations will usually be greater than would be

experienced if only bedrock was present. In this case, the ground accelerations shown on the USGS maps would underestimate the local hazard, as they are based upon accelerations that would be expected if firm soil or rock were present at the surface.

Based upon the 500-year map (10% probability of exceedance in 50 years) (Figure 2), the estimated peak horizontal acceleration in Weston County ranges from 2%g in the northeastern portion of the county to over 4%g in the western part of the county. These accelerations are roughly comparable to intensity IV earthquakes (1.4%g - 3.9%g) to intensity V earthquakes (3.9%g - 9.2%g). Intensity IV earthquakes cause little damage. Intensity V earthquakes may result in cracked plaster and broken dishes. Newcastle would be subjected to an acceleration of approximately 3%g or intensity IV.

Based upon the 1000-year map (5% probability of exceedance in 50 years) (Figure 3), the estimated peak horizontal acceleration in Weston County ranges from approximately 4%g in the northeastern portion of the county to nearly 8%g in the western part of the county. These accelerations are roughly comparable to intensity V earthquakes (3.9%g - 9.2%g). Intensity V earthquakes can result in cracked plaster and broken dishes. Newcastle would be subjected to an acceleration of approximately 5%g or intensity V.

Based upon the 2500-year map (2% probability of exceedance in 50 years) (Figure 4), the estimated peak horizontal acceleration in Weston County ranges from approximately 7%g in the northeastern corner of the county to over 14%g in the far western portion of the county. These accelerations are roughly comparable to intensity V earthquakes (3.9%g - 9.2%g) and intensity VI earthquakes (9.2%g - 18.0%g). Intensity V earthquakes can result in cracked plaster and broken dishes. Intensity VI earthquakes can result in fallen plaster and damaged chimneys. Newcastle would be subjected to an acceleration of approximately 9%g or intensity V-VI.

As the historic record is limited, it is nearly impossible to determine when a 2,500-year event last occurred in the county. Because of the uncertainty involved, and based upon the fact that the new International Building Code utilizes 2,500-year events for building design, it is suggested that the 2,500-year probabilistic maps be used for Weston County analyses. This conservative approach is in the interest of public safety.

**Table 1:**

Modified Mercalli Intensity	Acceleration (%g) (PGA)	Perceived Shaking	Potential Damage
I	<0.17	Not felt	None
II	0.17 – 1.4	Weak	None
III	0.17 – 1.4	Weak	None
IV	1.4 – 3.9	Light	None
V	3.9 – 9.2	Moderate	Very Light
VI	9.2 – 18	Strong	Light
VII	18 – 34	Very Strong	Moderate
VIII	34 – 65	Severe	Moderate to Heavy
IX	65 – 124	Violent	Heavy
X	>124	Extreme	Very Heavy
XI	>124	Extreme	Very Heavy
XII	>124	Extreme	Very Heavy

Modified Mercalli Intensity and peak ground acceleration (PGA) (Wald, et al 1999).

## Abridged Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale

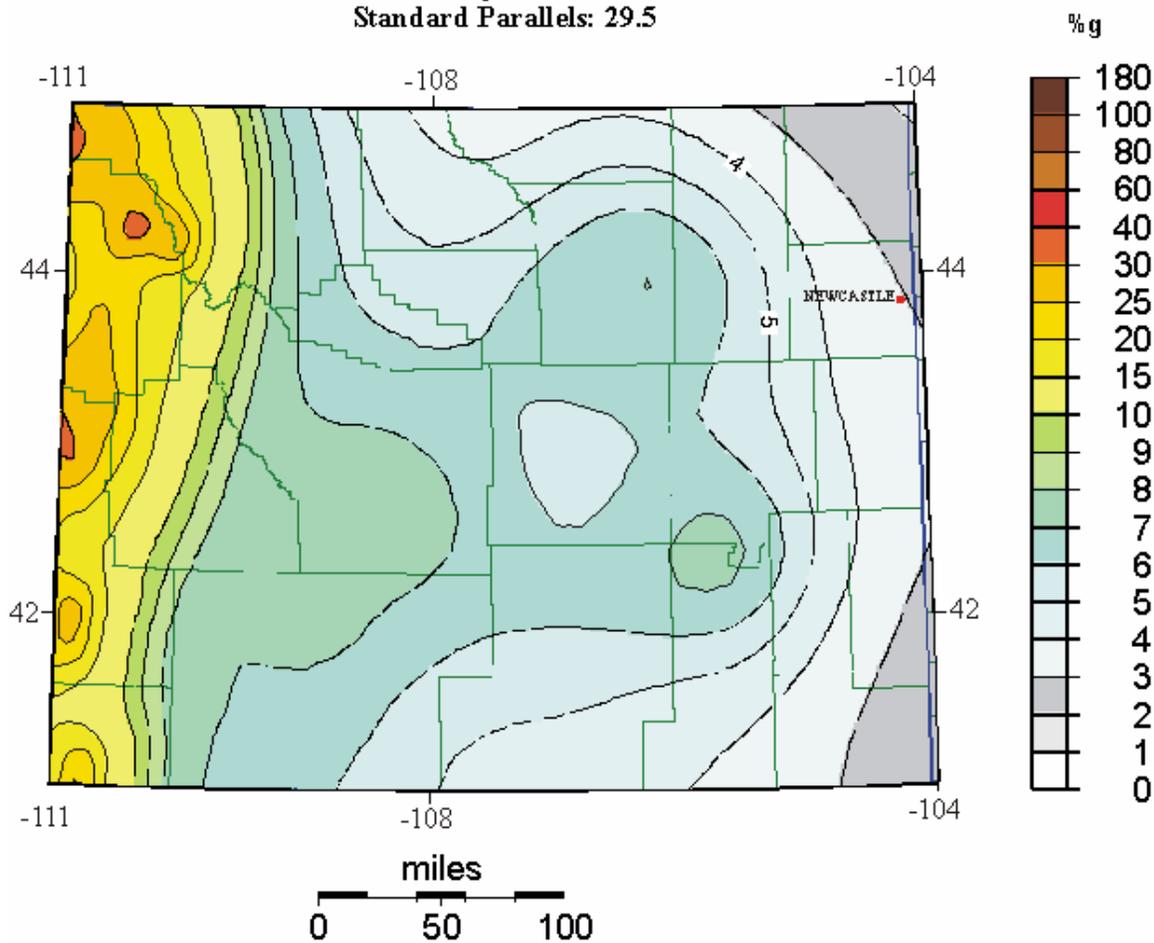
### Intensity value and description:

- I** Not felt except by a very few under especially favorable circumstances.
- II** Felt only by a few persons at rest, especially on upper floors of buildings. Delicately suspended objects may swing.
- III** Felt quite noticeably indoors, especially on upper floors of buildings, but many people do not recognize it as an earthquake. Standing automobiles may rock slightly. Vibration like passing of truck. Duration estimated.
- IV** During the day felt indoors by many, outdoors by few. At night some awakened. Dishes, windows, doors disturbed; walls make creaking sound. Sensation like heavy truck striking building. Standing automobiles rocked noticeably.
- V** Felt by nearly everyone, many awakened. Some dishes, windows, and so on broken; cracked plaster in a few places; unstable objects overturned. Disturbances of trees, poles, and other tall objects sometimes noticed. Pendulum clocks may stop.
- VI** Felt by all, many frightened and run outdoors. Some heavy furniture moved; a few instances of fallen plaster and damaged chimneys. Damage slight.
- VII** Everybody runs outdoors. Damage negligible in buildings of good design and construction; slight to moderate in well-built ordinary structures; considerable in poorly built or badly designed structures; some chimneys broken. Noticed by persons driving cars.
- VIII** Damage slight in specially designed structures; considerable in ordinary substantial buildings with partial collapse; great in poorly built structures. Panel walls thrown out of frame structures. Fall of chimneys, factory stacks, columns, monuments, walls. Heavy furniture overturned. Sand and mud ejected in small amounts. Changes in well water. Persons driving cars disturbed.
- IX** Damage considerable in specially designed structures; well-designed frame structures thrown out of plumb; great in substantial buildings, with partial collapse. Buildings shifted off foundations. Ground cracked conspicuously. Underground pipes broken.
- X** Some well-built wooden structures destroyed; most masonry and frame structures destroyed with foundations; ground badly cracked. Rails bent. Landslides considerable from river banks and steep slopes. Shifted sand and mud. Water splashed, sloped over banks.
- XI** Few, if any, (masonry) structures remain standing. Bridges destroyed. Broad fissures in ground. Underground pipelines completely out of service. Earth slumps and land slips in soft ground. Rails bent greatly.
- XII** Damage total. Waves seen on ground surface. Lines of sight and level distorted. Objects thrown into the air.

**Peak Acceleration (%g)  
with 10% Probability  
of Exceedance in 50 Years  
site: NEHRP B-C boundary**

U.S. Geological Survey  
National Seismic Hazard Mapping Project

Albers Conic Equal-Area  
Projection  
Standard Parallels: 29.5

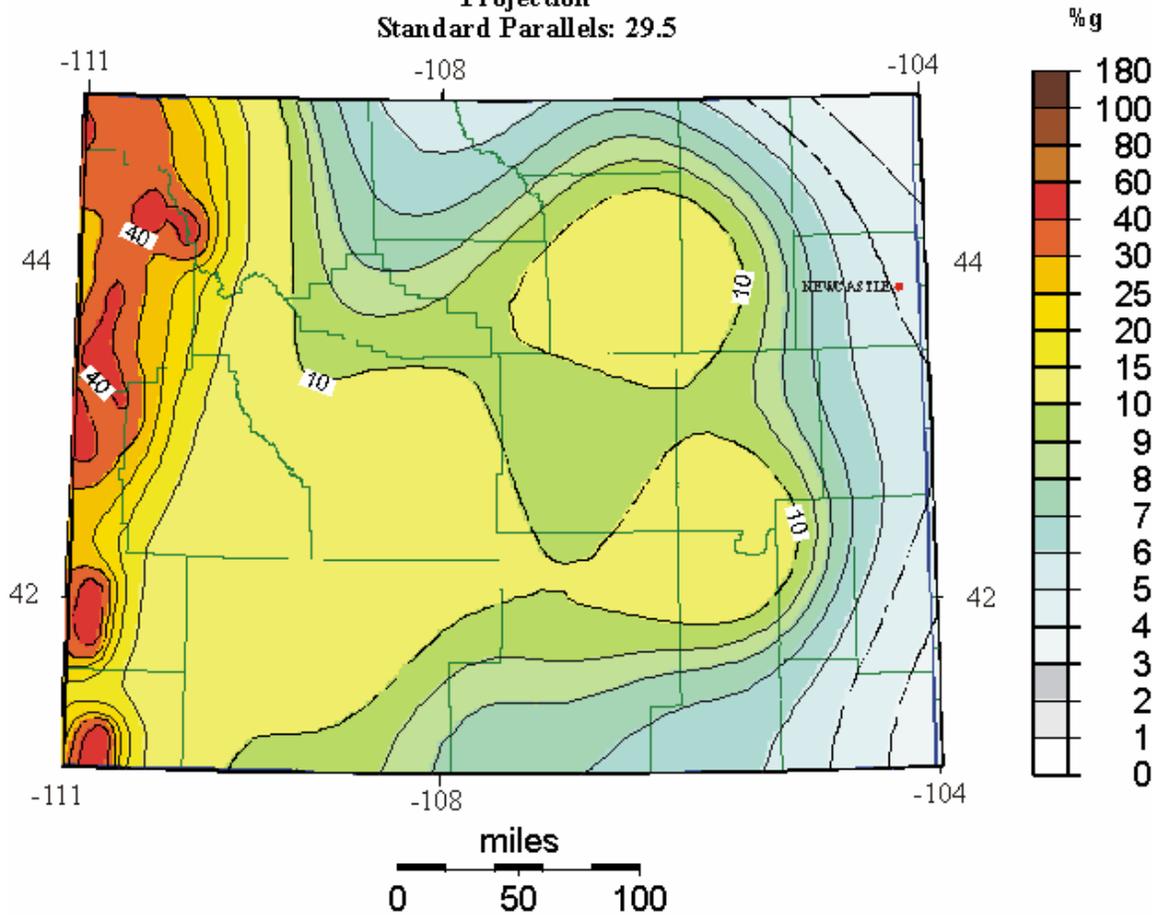


**Figure 2.** 500-year probabilistic acceleration map (10% probability of exceedance in 50 years).

**Peak Acceleration (%g)  
with 5% Probability  
of Exceedance in 50 Years  
site: NEHRP B-C boundary**

U.S. Geological Survey  
National Seismic Hazard Mapping Project

Albers Conic Equal-Area  
Projection  
Standard Parallels: 29.5

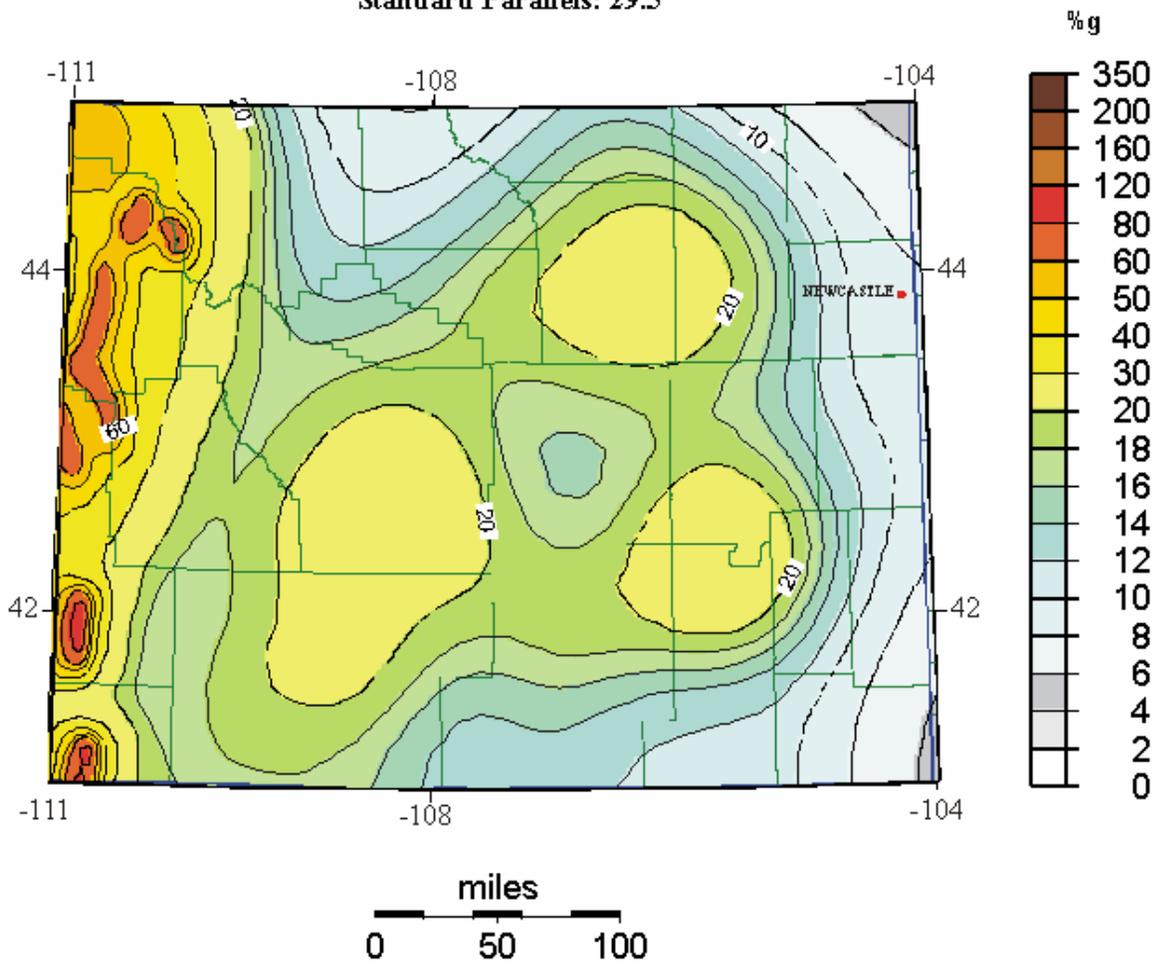


**Figure 3.** 1000-year probabilistic acceleration map (5% probability of exceedance in 50 years).

**Peak Acceleration (% g)  
with 2% Probability  
of Exceedance in 50 Years  
site: NEHRP B-C boundary**

U.S. Geological Survey  
National Seismic Hazard Mapping Project

Albers Conic Equal-Area  
Projection  
Standard Parallels: 29.5



**Figure 4.** 2500-year probabilistic acceleration map (2% probability of exceedance in 50 years).

## Summary

There have been five historic magnitude 3.0 or intensity II and greater earthquakes recorded in or near Weston County. Because of the limited historic record, it is possible to underestimate the seismic hazard in Weston County if historic earthquakes are used as the sole basis for analysis. Earthquake and ground motion probability maps give a more reasonable estimate of damage potential in areas without exposed active faults at the surface, such as Weston County.

Current earthquake probability maps that are used in the newest building codes suggest a scenario that would result in moderate damage to buildings and their contents, with damage increasing from the southeast to the north-northwest. More specifically, the probability-based worst-case scenario could result in the following damage at points throughout the county:

### Intensity VI Earthquake Areas

Clareton  
Hampshire  
Morrisey  
Newcastle  
Osage  
Rochelle  
Upton

In intensity VI earthquakes, some heavy furniture can be moved. There may be some instances of fallen plaster and damaged chimneys.

### Intensity V Earthquake Areas

Buckhorn  
Four Corners  
Newcastle

In intensity V earthquakes, dishes and windows can break and plaster can crack. Unstable objects may overturn. Tall objects such as trees and power poles can be disturbed.

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