Spooky Lights in Cascades Thought Linked to Quakes

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Small earthquakes and increasing underground strain may be the cause of spooky lights viewed for years by awed forest fire lookouts and other eyewitnesses in Washington state's Cascade Mountains, a scientist said Friday.

Sightings of such eerie lights — often resembling glowing baseballs floating along treetops — apparently have decreased since the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens, suggesting the lights might be useful in predicting quakes and volcanic activity, said John S. Derr, a geophysicist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Denver.

Similar spooky lights, usually seen only at night, have been viewed for 30 years in the area around New Madrid, Mo., the site of three great earthquakes in 1810 and 1811, Derr said.

But he said "we just don't know" if the presence of those lights would be valuable in predicting future quakes there.

Derr presented his findings at the American Geophysical Society's national meeting. The study was co-authored by Michael A. Persinger, of Laurentian University's environmental psychophysiology laboratory in Sudbury, Ontario.

"People should know there's a natural phenemonon going on and they shouldn't be spooked about it," Derr said.

But he warned that people who see the lights should not try to touch them because "it could give a very powerful and even lethal shock. We simply don't know enough at this point to know how dangerous they might be."

Derr explained such lights might be caused by flammable or luminescent gas released when the ground cracks. Another possibility is that the cracking ground releases high-energy electric particles from rocks, and that the particles somehow gather into a visible ball of energy. He cited "a couple of possibilities" about what the lights might mean.

"One is that the luminous phenomena are an indicator that strain is building up and that there is going to be an earthquake or an eruption. The other is that they accompany microearthquakes that we have not recorded because of the lack of (quake-recording) instrumentation there.

"If the first case is true, they (the lights) might have some predictive value," he added. "If the second case is true, they don't have any more or less predictive value (for impending eruptions or large quakes) than microearthquakes do."

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