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FEDERAL COORDINATING OFFICE

federal emergency management agency

MOUNT ST. HELENS TECHNICAL INFORMATION NETWORK

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BULLETIN #12 - "Foodstuffs and Volcanic Ashfall"

A Canadian health official has queried the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as to whether there is any health threat to consumers who eat foodstuffs grown or raised in the path of the Mt. St Helens ashfall. In addition, newspaper reports have indicated there may be some concern among food wholesalers and grocery chains regarding the safety of foodstuffs produced in the Northwest.

SCIENTISTS AND FEDERAL HEALTH OFFICIALS HAVE FOUND NO EVIDENCE OF ANY HEALTH THREAT CAUSED BY INGESTING FOOD FROM ASHFALL AREAS. "Everything to date shows that the ash is a non-problem in so far as food safety is concerned," states Jim Davis, Director of Investigation for the Food and Drug Administration laboratory in Seattle, Washington.

The Food and Drug Administration has taken 17 samples of ash in 10 locations where fruits, vegetables and grains are being grown. The samples analyzed to date have shown that the ash contains only minute quantities of lead, arsenic, and cadmium (in all cases, less than 2 parts per million). Tests by various federal and state agencies have also shown that the ash contains radioactivity in no greater proportion than is found in most earthly substances (or so-called "background radiation").

Studies by Washington State University on milk produced by cows in the path of the ashfall show no difference in the milk's composition before and after the cows were exposed to the ash. There was a slight decline in the quantity of milk produced, perhaps the result of some

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dairy cows eating less of the ash-laden feed.

In preliminary samples, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, has found small percentages of free crystalline silica (SiO_2) in the ash. While this silica may harm the lungs when inhaled in large quantities, no studies have yet shown that silica is harmful when eaten.

Furthermore, FDA-required food processing procedures (basically, cleaning of harvested foods prior to processing or shipping and required air filtration systems) are sufficient to remove almost all ash which may have fallen on food produced in the ashfall area.

(A chemical analysis of the ash is available in Technical Information Bulletin #8).