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COORDINATING  
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NETWORK

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federal emergency  
management agency

Tuesday, May 27, 1980

BULLETIN #3 - "Precautions in Handling Volcanic Ash"

The Health Services Division of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, in consultation with the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Atlanta, and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Morgantown (NIOSH, CDC) have been working with the laboratory at the University of Washington, and with other experts, in the preliminary analysis of ash from the Mount St. Helens eruptions. In addition, we have reviewed reports of analyses being undertaken at other laboratories, including the U.S. Geological Survey.

It is known that the ash contains silicon, but only certain types of this material are known to cause silicosis. Silicosis is an industrial disease resulting from scarring of the lungs, usually after many years of heavy occupational exposure to certain silicon dusts.

In our opinion, a sufficiently detailed analysis of the ash is not yet available to make a complete evaluation of the risks of exposure. However, from the knowledge gained so far, the short term exposures currently being received by the general population are unlikely to pose a significant health hazard. Nevertheless, certain precautions should be adopted by those people receiving heavy exposures, such as workers engaged in clean-up operations or other occupations in which exposure may occur.

These precautions include handling the dust out-of-doors or in well-ventilated areas; and whenever possible, the ash should be wetted down to reduce its movement. High efficiency dust masks should also be worn by those who will be heavily exposed. (See appendix).

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