

STATEMENT OF MORTIMER L. DOWNEY, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION
FOR BUDGET AND PROGRAMS, BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
ON JUNE 10, 1980.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to describe the efforts of the Department of Transportation to respond to the enormous destruction and disruption of our transportation systems caused by the Mt. St. Helens eruption. Accompanying me today is Mr. Richard D. Morgan, Associate Federal Highway Administrator for Engineering and Traffic Operations.

Effect of the Eruption

As we all know, Mt. St. Helens erupted violently on Sunday, May 18, sending mudslides down the mountain, flattening thousands of acres of timber, causing floods on the nearby Toutle River, and spewing ash into the air that was carried by the prevailing winds east across the country.

A subsequent but less violent eruption occurred on Sunday, May 25. This second eruption caused mudslides (but no major flooding) and deposited minor amounts of volcanic ash on southern and western Washington, and on northern Oregon.

The flooding on the Toutle River carried tremendous amounts of logs, debris, and trees which damaged or totally destroyed 35 miles of State Route 504 including 6 to 8 bridges. The longest of these bridges was a 200-foot concrete bridge on Route 504 over the Toutle River near the city of Toutle. Fortunately, the area in the vicinity of the City of Toutle

remained accessible since routes to the north and west did not have damage.

But by far the most far reaching effect of the eruptions was the fallout of volcanic ash. The widespread volcanic ash fallout affected approximately 25,000 miles of off-system public roads as well as 11,300 miles of Federal-aid system highways in Washington and Idaho. The material consists primarily of a fine silicon oxide, is gray in color, is highly abrasive, and varies in grain size and depth. When it gets wet, it forms a gummy, plasticized substance with adhesive qualities similar to portland cement. This has seriously affected automobile travel in the Northwest and has made us very concerned about the highway safety problems it causes. Even when traffic drives over a very thin layer of volcanic ash of less than 1/8 of an inch, clouds of ash billow up behind vehicles creating a hazard to traffic because of extremely poor visibility. High winds have also caused open roads to be closed due to poor visibility from blowing ash dust. The fine ash particles also can cause major damage to automobile engines and moving parts.

The removal of the volcanic ash from the highways is a problem that has never been encountered before. Since the material is quite light, conventional removal methods merely stir it up and cause it to settle back down on the road. Many ash removal techniques have been tried, but none seem to be very fast or effective. The Washington Department of Transportation reports that the best removal technique seems to be a very expensive and slow method involving multiple trucks with plows, water sprayers, and brooms. Removal progress under this method has been at a rate of about 2 lane miles per hour.

The transportation impact of this problem is not restricted to highway travel alone.

The Federal Aviation Administration has restricted flights in the immediate vicinity of the volcano, and an exclusive corridor has been set aside for the use of emergency aircraft flying search and rescue missions. Two special emergency air traffic control centers have been established. An around-the-clock center in Seattle routes air traffic away from the danger area, and a separate center in Toledo, Washington, controls emergency aircraft operating in the restricted corridor. Over 100,000 tons of ash were removed from runways at Spokane, Washington, before that airport was reopened.

The Columbia River's 40-foot navigation channel was reduced to a depth of about 14 feet, and the 600-foot channel width was reduced to 200 feet. The Corps of Engineers will describe their efforts to restore navigation.

Impact on FHWA's Emergency Relief Program

The President declared a major disaster in the States of Washington and Idaho on May 21 and May 22 respectively, making those States eligible for public assistance under the Disaster Relief Act of 1974.

Both the States of Washington and Idaho have formally indicated to FHWA their intent to request funds under the Emergency Relief program authorized by Section 125 of Title 23 U.S. Code. I should note that this is a separate and distinct program from those managed under the Disaster Relief Act and is funded through Highway Trust Fund contract authority. The U.S. Forest Service has also indicated its intent to request Emergency Relief funds for forest roads damaged by the eruption and volcanic ash.

As yet, we do not have detailed damage assessments for those highways eligible for Emergency Relief funds. We hope to receive firm data later this week. However, our preliminary data, which is based on rough estimates, indicates that there may be a total of \$100 million of emergency road work which would be eligible for funding under this Emergency Relief program. This includes about \$65 million for road repairs and \$35 million for ash removal.

However, due to several exceptional disasters over the past several years, demands for Emergency Relief funds has substantially exceeded the \$100 million program authorized for each fiscal year. The assistance required to repair and clear roads damaged by the Mt. St. Helens eruption has added a significant new burden to our already severely strained ER program which currently has a \$150 million backlog of unfunded requests, including costs of work begun to rectify disasters which occurred in prior years.

Legislation is being considered to address these problems, and could be forthcoming when the Administration completes its review of disaster relief funding.

I would be happy to answer any questions.