

asu news [science & tech]

April 15, 2010

twitter subscribe [news] asu [insight]

now

science & tech

business, culture & affairs

university

sports

archives & search

press room

ASU expert: Volcanic ash could disrupt travel for months

Shutting down air travel in response to the volcanic activity in Iceland might seem drastic, but it is a measured response to the hard-to-measure threat caused by the ash plume that shot high into Earth's atmosphere as a result of a volcano.

Because of the eruption, air travel across much of Europe has been delayed or halted until the plume effectively dissipates. It could remain that way for sometime, according to an Arizona State University expert who participated in various Federal Aviation Administration and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) meetings in the early 1990s about the effects of Alaskan volcanoes on air traffic.

"The problem with the ash is that it's difficult to detect except in large concentrations, but we don't know how low a concentration is 'safe,' so flight traffic controllers have to err on the side of caution," said Jonathan Fink, an ASU professor and volcanologist whose specialty is studying volcanoes and their aftermath. "The major danger occurs when ash gets sucked into the engines, melts into glass and then that glass fuses to the engine parts. The ash also damages windows and windscreens, making it hard for pilots to see. Ash has not caused any commercial airliner to crash yet, but it's come very close."

Fink, a Foundation Professor in ASU's School of Earth and Space Exploration and School of Sustainability, also has headed up a review of the USGS's Volcano Hazard Program and the Smithsonian Institution's Global Volcanism Program, the two leading U.S. government volcano research organizations. He said if the eruption continues it will force some tough decisions to be made.

"This eruption could continue for weeks, months or years," he added. "If that happens, there will be intense pressure from business to resume flights. But who decides what risk is acceptable?"

Skip Derra, skip.derra@asu.edu
480-965-4823
Media Relations

Share this story: [Email this page](#)



read more

School of Earth and Space Exploration
Robert S. Dietz Museum of Geology
Center for Meteorite Studies
Mars Space Flight Facility
Planetarium
BEYOND: Center for Fundamental Concepts in Science

science & tech headlines

ASU receives powerful nano-scale imaging instrument

Probing the dark side of the universe

Evidence of climate change underscores need for action

featured



Top 10 new species

today's headlines

Students win study-abroad scholarships to increase national security

ASU names Anselin 1st Walter Isard Chair

ASU receives powerful nano-scale imaging instrument

editor's picks

Girls got game: Professor helps close computer science gender gap

Twilight tours focus on petroglyphs, plants

Who is Elena Kagan?