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Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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Health impact of a volcanic eruption

Residents are reminded of possible health effects

(Anchorage, AK) — A recent increase in seismic activity at Mount Redoubt and the possibility of an eruption has prompted the state Department of Health and Social Services to issue this reminder of the possible health effects of a volcanic eruption and associated ash fall.

Health Effects

Respiratory problems resulting from inhaling volcanic ash depend on factors such as the size and concentration of particles in the air. These short-term effects are not considered harmful for people without pre-existing respiratory conditions.

Symptoms might include:

- nasal irritation and excessive mucous;
- throat irritation and dry cough;
- discomfort while breathing; and
- airway irritation, especially for people with asthma or bronchitis.

People typically experience eye discomfort or irritation during and after ash fall, especially those who wear contact lenses. Individuals with “dry eye syndrome” might also experience ailments due to the presence of ash. Signs and symptoms might include:

- feeling like something is in your eye;
- painful, itchy, or bloodshot eyes; and
- mucous discharge or excessive tearing.

Recommendations

In case of an eruption where more than a trace or dusting of ash (1/32 inch) is anticipated:

- Close windows, doors, and fireplace/woodstove dampers. Minimize the use of forced air heaters to prevent ash and gases from getting inside the home.
- Replace or clean furnace filters frequently.
- Use an N-95 disposable respirator (available at some hardware stores) or dust mask while outdoors or while cleaning up ash that has gotten indoors.

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- Wear goggles while outdoors or while cleaning up ash that has gotten indoors.
- Keep your skin covered to avoid irritation from contact with ash.
- Stay indoors and avoid driving.
- Avoid drinking water that has ash in it, or, if no clean water is available, let the ash settle before drinking.
- Wet ash lightly prior to clean-up to avoid stirring up the particulates by dry brooming or shoveling.
- Clear roofs of ash in excess of 1 – 2 inches; **exercise extreme caution on ladders and roofs.**
- Pay attention to warnings, and comply with instructions from local authorities (i.e., local health officials will inform the public when it is safe to go outside, drive, drink water, where to dispose of ash, etc.).
- Seek medical attention if substantial respiratory symptoms develop.

In the case of a sizeable eruption, the state Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services along with the Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Environmental Conservation, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the Alaska Volcano Observatory will issue regular alerts and specific recommendations for impacted communities.

For more information on the status of Alaska volcanoes go to the Alaska Volcano Observatory Web site at: <http://www.avo.alaska.edu/>

For more information on health hazards, other impacts, and what to do before, during, and after an ash fall, see:

<http://volcanoes.usgs.gov/ash/>

<http://www.ivhnh.org/>

<http://www.ak-prepared.com/plans/mitigation/volcano.htm>

For a copy of the state Section of Epidemiology Bulletin *Health Effects Associated with Volcanic Eruptions* go to: http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/bulletins/docs/b2006_05.pdf

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