

Les AuCoin

EXTENSION OF REMARKS BY
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CORPS OF ENGINEERS KEEPS COLUMBIA RIVER OPEN

Mr. Speaker, when Mount St. Helens erupted on May 18th, more than 40 million cubic yards of debris and volcanic ash were dumped into the Columbia River. The nation, transfixed by this awesome phenomenon, anxiously followed the news reports of damage and destruction in the region. Rumors, too, spread across the land as to the effects of the volcano upon the ability of Columbia River ports to function. Word was out that the mighty Columbia was closed to shipping and the bustling, prosperous Port of Portland was shut down.

These early reports were true, but only for a short time. Today, thanks to the Army Corps of Engineers, the mighty Columbia is open, commerce continues to ply this great water course, and the Port of Portland is doing business as usual. Contrary to some media reports, the Columbia River seaports are not "virtually closed;" neither is the Portland harbor "choked with mud" and shut off from ocean traffic.

The May 18 eruption and the resulting flow of debris and sediment into the Columbia river did interrupt river commerce and pose a hazard to shipping. However, this condition was temporary.

The eruption caused a mud flow which partially blocked the Columbia by creating a shoal at the point where the Cowlitz river joins the Columbia. The seven-mile stretch of volcanic debris, in the worst spot, left only 15 feet of water in the Columbia channel that normally is 40 feet deep and 600 feet wide.

The response of the Army Corps of Engineers to this situation was immediate and effective. Within two days after the shoal was discovered, the Corps' hopper-dredge "Biddle" was at work on the problem. During the week, the Corps summoned several additional dredges to assist in the work. Mount St. Helens erupted on Sunday. By Friday, ship traffic in the Columbia River had resumed.

In the aftermath of the eruption, the Corps of Engineers predicted that 22 million cubic yards of material had to be removed from the river at a cost of \$44 million. Today, seven dredges are working around the clock on eliminating the shoal.

While the Corps works on the river, it is "business as usual" in the Port of Portland. Already, liner service has resumed. Container and automobile ships regularly are moving into and out of the port. Since May 23, more than 200 vessels with drafts of more than 31 feet have crossed the shoaled area. Today, the dredging is on schedule and vessels with drafts up to 37 feet may safely ~~may~~ navigate the river. I might note, Mr. Speaker, that 18 warships of the U.S. Navy as well as Canada and New Zealand recently steamed up the Columbia for Portland's annual Rose Festival.

The U.S. Coast Guard, in addition to arranging special navigational aids in the river, has established a plan to allow ships to transit the shoaled area only during a two-hour high tide period each day in order to disrupt the dredging operation as little as possible.

The Corps predicts that by this fall, the river channel will be restored to its 40-foot-deep, 600-foot-wide former dimensions. Geologists report that an earthen "dam" that has formed at Mt. St. Helens' Spirit lake is a solid wall that appears stable. There is but a slim possibility of another mud flow large enough to effect the Columbia River.

The situation which exists now is being handled efficiently by a team effort on the part of many, including the Port of Portland and the Coast Guard. However, as a Port of Portland official pointed out, in large part the story of the clearing of the Columbia River ship channel is a "testimonial to the quick action and unflagging efforts of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers."

The Port of Portland has been among the fastest growing ports in the country. The American Association of Port Authorities, in its most recent reporting period, found that tonnage of goods transported through the port was up more than 34 per cent, while the value of cargo shipped through Portland had increased almost 45 per cent. The Port of Portland, as the largest export port on the West Coast, and the Columbia River are vital links in our nation's export chain. I am happy to report to my colleagues today that they are links which remain unbroken.