Ferdie J. Deering

JUN 5 1980

Mount St. Helens Too Much for EPA

THE spectacular eruption of Mount St. Helens hasn't done anybody much good, but it has demonstrated that man-made regulations to control air pollution are mighty puny.

The Environmental Protection Agency is keeping quiet. Even this powerful, well-heeled bureaucracy realizes it can't order construction of a pollution control device big enough to contain the ash.

Prognosticators have been busy warning us of possible results from the outpouring of talc-like ash said to be 64 percent silica. This is considerably higher than silica exposure limits set by the Occupational Safety and Health Agency for industrial plants.

Unquestionably, everyone in the areas where large amounts of the ash fall are experiencing discomfort, inconvenience, property damage and extra work. Ash accumulations seem to be more difficult to get rid of than dust blown into Oklahoma by the Black Blizzard of 1935.

Water supplies are clogged, fish have been killed, electric power and transportation disrupted. Possibly quite a bit of production time has been consumed in volcanic conversation by employees in affected areas.

Extensive crop damage is feared, but it remains to be substantiated. A Texas scientist said "In the long run, a good sprinkling of ash replenishes the soil and renews its fertility."

The "jet stream," a mysterious current that flows continuously around the earth, often is blamed for vagaries of our weather. You rarely hear anybody report good deeds done by the "jet stream," and one wonders what might happen if a lot of silica-laden ash strayed into its path.

Even worse, what if Mount St. Helens should start belching fluorocarbons or other chemicals into the atmosphere? Two or three years ago activists got fluorocarbons banned because they feared the propellants from bathroom sprays were damaging the ozone. They said this could allow lethal sun rays to endanger life on earth.

Now people are wondering if Mount St. Helens ash will affect our weather. Certain climatologists seem to believe that it could stimulate increased rainfall by seeding clouds. This might happen.

Last November, this writer watched from a 20th floor window in a Nashville hotel as an early morning rainstorm broke up. As the clouds passed over the plume of an industrial smokestack, the moisture-laden clouds began raining again. Beyond it, the rain stopped again.

This went on for some 30 minutes, constituting an impressive demonstration of nucleating materials enhancing rainfall. Many Oklahomans have witnessed similar results from seeding by aircraft.

Oklahoma has received a good deal of rain lately. Whether any of it resulted from volcanic fallout is now known. May is our state's rainiest month, usually. If we don't get plenty of rain in May, we are apt to have a dry year.

Mount St. Helens probably will settle down one of these days to become a lucrative tourist attraction. Residents will outlive the dire results predicted. Then we can concentrate on politics again!