

VOLCANO!



Groups argue use of mountain

Humans alone do not create or shape environments. The cataclysmic eruption of Mt. St. Helens on May 18 proved that.

Nevertheless, various land-management plans already are attempting to determine what is best for the mountain and the public.

On one hand, groups such as the Mt. St. Helens Protection Association want the area designated as a national monument. On the other hand, timber companies such as Weyerhaeuser want to continue salvaging lumber.

The MSHPA, based in Longview, Wash., has advocated environmental management and protection of Mt. St. Helens for more than 50 years. The group first sought national park status for the mountain in 1930.

Susan Saul, an MSHPA member, says Rep. Don Bonker, D-Wash., has agreed to introduce a bill to Congress "within a few months" establishing a Mt. St. Helens National Monument. Bonker, himself, doesn't endorse the bill.

A national monument also can be established by presidential order. However, Saul says she doesn't think the group "would get anywhere with Reagan."

"Also, we consider it to be a national issue," Saul says. "So by having it discussed in Congress, we're putting it in a national forum."

The area within the proposed boundaries includes the volcano, the main area devastated by the eruption, a 17-mile stretch of private land in the North Fork Toutle River Valley that was filled with a massive landslide, older geological features and special wildlife areas north and

south of Mt. St. Helens. It's comprised of 141,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land, 65,000 acres of private land—mostly Weyerhaeuser Company and Burlington Northern railroad—and 10,000 acres of state forest.

Saul says former President Carter considered declaring the volcano a national monument, but decided against it partly because of timber industry lobbying efforts.

"The industry lobby said 'We have to give the public a chance to respond,' yet at the same time, everybody's up there doing their own thing," Saul says. "Weyerhaeuser is in there logging salvage. And the Forest Service, having sold two bids (of timber) already, is planning on selling 10 more at the end of the month."

The MSHPA proposal would prohibit salvage logging within the national monument except where necessary to protect life and property. Removing salvage and building roads the steep mountain slopes could increase erosion and eventually cause slides and flooding, Saul says.

Research now underway at Oregon State University does indicate the downed timber on the volcano may be slowing erosion by trapping sediments between logs and providing footing for new vegetation.

Professor Alexander McBirney, director of the University of Oregon's Center for Volcanology, says the biggest danger is not from logging salvage but from large amounts of ash, which enhances the erosion power of water.

"These logs represent an enormous loss, not only to the timber companies but to the

people who earn salaries working in the industry," McBirney says. "After one year, these logs will have deteriorated in value, so it's now or never. It's hard to argue they don't have a right to their own timber."

McBirney says a national monument designation wouldn't necessarily aid scientific study of the mountain.

"Very rapidly, the ash will be washed away and the downed trees will rot, so everyone's in there now frantically recording information," he says. "It's not the sort of thing we can wait 10 years to get."

"On the other hand, we want to continue observing the volcano. But you don't need a national monument to do that."

Saul says a big impetus for seeking national designation is to promote tourism. Cowlitz County, where Mt. St. Helens is located, is dependent on the timber industry.

"Visitors from around the country and outside the country know something will be here for them — recreational areas, scientific information, facilities — when they come," Saul says. "And without a national monument, it's less likely you'd have guide books for it, and it wouldn't appear on highway maps."

"It would smooth out the ups and downs we go through with the timber industry."

Speaking as a geologist, McBirney says, "I find it hard to say yes, you must draw a line and preserve what's inside. But historically speaking, this is one of the most extraordinary geographic events in history, and it seems only right to make it special."

Other land-management plans in various stages of development are those of the U.S. Forest Service, the state of Washington, and the two major corporate land owners. The Forest Service plan, developed by a special Mt. St. Helens Planning Unit, was made public Wednesday.

The plan includes eight alternatives ranging from proposed wilderness to no action. Their "preferred management plan" would provide for a 89,560-acre interpretive, or geological, area. It would designate recreational activities and scientific research and would allow some timber salvage to be harvested.

Washington state's own plan will be made public in April. A so-called industry plan recommends 66,650 acres for recreational use. The plan allows some salvage logging and provides for roads, trails and visitor centers.

Mt. St. Helens is only the second volcano of the Cascade Range to erupt in this century. California's Mt. Lassen erupted in 1915.

McBirney says the Mt. St. Helens explosion is the best recorded large-scale eruption in history.

"The main thing we've learned from Mt. St. Helens is ways in which to monitor volcanoes," he says. "The techniques are very innovative. We've made tremendous advances in anticipating the sorts of things that might occur throughout the Cascades."

But despite popular belief, McBirney says there is no connection between the eruption and earthquakes near San Francisco and Los Angeles. And there's no reason to expect other

Cascade Range volcanoes to begin erupting. "Nothing connects one volcano to the other. They're independent."

McBirney, who visited the mountain last week, says the area already is transforming.

"Surely everyone should get a chance to see it while it lasts. No amount of pictures or films can convey the magnitude of the destruction."

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