

FORGOTTEN Lesson

When something as painful as the volcanic ash shutdown of Europe occurs, there must be safety lessons to be learned. Let me try to point out one.

In the opening hours of the event, I was able to talk to some of the people in the Volcanic Airways Warning System, calling to offer congratulations. They have been tying together this diverse network for decades, and when a major eruption occurred in the middle of the North Atlantic Tracks, the system worked. But even in those early hours, there was a sense of impending doom. Those scientists and meteorologists all knew that vital information was missing. During years of meetings they had pressed to establish an ash concentration level that could be used as a safe operational threshold. But despite the presence of the smartest people on the subject, no one was allowed to offer a number. Their companies or their governments just didn't want to accept the potential liability.

As a result, things played out as you would expect. The scientists published charts showing where volcanic ash would be; they knew that it wasn't the information that was needed, but it was the best they were allowed to offer. This forced a bunch of regulators and politicians in Europe to make safety decisions in public that the experts were not even allowed to make in private. You can criticize the European authorities for over-reacting, but that is about as productive as critiquing the next sunrise. There isn't much you can do about it. Europe responded the only way it could. Maybe the authorities will do better next time, but only if they are not put in an impossible position.

Some have suggested that United States dealt with the problem more effectively during Alaskan eruptions. I am not sure that's the case. The U.S. solution was to delegate the decision to industry, a politically correct thing in that part of the world. Of course, industry leaders didn't have any better information than the European politicians, so they, in their turn, also did the normal thing: They dumped the problem on the captains. Pilots knew roughly where the ash was but had no information about how close they could operate. They just knew that too close could cause an accident, too far could bring their judgment into question, and if they smelled sulfur, they should probably turn. Not exactly a world-class risk-management process. However, a thousand uninformed decisions made in private create less of an uproar than a few big uninformed decisions made in public.

So what is the answer? It is pretty simple. Put the experts back in the room and keep the attorneys and the politicians out. Force a decision about the safe threshold, even if there is less information than we would like. If the data are shaky, make the best estimate and add a couple of zeros to it as a buffer. That process may sound crude, but that is how our predecessors did it. They knew that it was impossible to reduce political and civil liabilities by refusing to make decisions about risk. On this matter, we forgot that lesson, and look where it got us.



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