

ASU expert: Volcanic ash could disrupt travel for months

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Because of a volcanic eruption in Iceland, air travel across much of Europe has been delayed or halted and could remain that way for sometime, says professor Jonathan Fink.

Shutting down air travel in response to the [volcanic activity](#) in Iceland might seem drastic, but it is a measured response to the hard-to-measure threat caused by the [ash](#) plume that shot high into Earth's [atmosphere](#) as a result of a volcano.

Because of the eruption, air travel across much of Europe has been delayed or halted until the plume effectively dissipates. It could remain that way for sometime, according to an Arizona State University expert who participated in various Federal Aviation Administration and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) meetings in the early 1990s about the effects of Alaskan volcanoes on [air traffic](#).

“The problem with the ash is that it’s difficult to detect except in large concentrations, but we don’t know how low a concentration is ‘safe,’ so flight traffic controllers have to err on the side of caution,” said Jonathan Fink, an ASU professor and volcanologist whose specialty is studying volcanoes and their aftermath. “The major danger occurs when ash gets sucked into the engines, melts into glass and then that glass fuses to the engine parts. The ash also damages windows and windscreens, making it hard for pilots to see. Ash has not caused any commercial airliner to crash yet, but it’s come very close.”

Fink, a Foundation Professor in ASU's School of Earth and Space Exploration and School of Sustainability, also has headed up a review of the USGS's Volcano Hazard Program and the Smithsonian Institution's Global Volcanism Program, the two leading U.S. government [volcano](#) research organizations. He said if the eruption continues it will force some tough decisions to be made.

"This eruption could continue for weeks, months or years," he added. "If that happens, there will be intense pressure from business to resume flights. But who decides what risk is acceptable?"

Provided by Arizona State University

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