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Lessons from Europe's ash cloud

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David J. Keeling

Guest columnist

With ash from Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcanic eruption causing havoc across European air space, individual travelers and governments alike are turning to surface transport systems to address mobility challenges.

Not since Sept. 11, 2001, has the airline industry faced such a catastrophic shutdown of regional and trans-oceanic flights.

With tens of thousands of air travelers stranded around the world, questions are being asked about vulnerabilities inherent in the global air transport system. What might be the social and economic consequences of a prolonged shutdown of European airspace? How would the United States cope with a similar natural catastrophe?

If a huge volcanic eruption occurred in Alaska or along the Cascades, and climatic conditions were such that a thick ash cloud covered substantial portions of the U.S. for several days or even weeks, would the country be prepared to cope with the ensuing chaos?

Europe is fortunate during the current air disruptions to have a sophisticated network of ferries, high-speed trains and road transport to keep people and goods moving, however slowly. Despite overcrowding, capacity shortages and poor planning and coordination of infrastructure, the negative impacts of a prolonged air-space shutdown within the region can be minimized. For example, Britain mobilized Navy ships to help stranded passengers get back home. There is even talk of mobilizing cruise ships for trans-Atlantic crossings should the circumstances require a more extended outage of air traffic.

Should a similar air-traffic shutdown occur in the U.S., far fewer options are available for travelers. High-speed rail is non-existent across the nation, and even the semi-fast Boston-Washington rail corridor is ill-prepared to cope with any significant increase in demand.

Freeways and other roads are barely adequate to cope with existing traffic between major urban centers, and the resulting likely spike in gasoline demand from a major air-traffic disruption would ripple through the economy quickly. Prices would rise, supplies would contract and deaths and injuries on the roads likely would increase dramatically.

Unlike the European region, the U.S. has no forward-thinking, national, multimodal transportation plan and would be hard pressed to respond quickly and effectively to an air-traffic shutdown. If the government's response to Hurricane Katrina is any guide, chaos and crisis would follow a volcanic ash event in the U.S., with tremendous social and economic suffering. No government can predict extraordinary natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Yet a basic understanding of accessibility and mobility geographies would enable governments, emergency responders, and others to have in place a meaningful strategy to cope with such an event.

As the Icelandic eruption has demonstrated, an unforeseen event can have serious economic and social consequences. Indeed, Europe's experience with the ash disruptions should be a wake-up call for U.S. planners and policymakers, especially in terms of the country's infrastructural deficiencies.

In an unprepared America, the fallout might be even more catastrophic in the absence of meaningful contingency plans to cope with air travel disruptions.

David Keeling is a member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle and professor of geography at Western Kentucky University. His e-mail address is david.keeling@wku.edu.

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