Skamania Sheriff: Don't Blame Us

VANCOUVER, Wash. (UPI) — Skamania County Sheriff Bill Closner doesn't want to hear anyone blame law enforcement agencies for the death toll on Mount St. Helens.

Closner said his deputies and other police officials did everything possible to convince residents, tourists, property owners and loggers the volcano was extremely dangerous.

"The bottom line is, nobody would listen," Closner said Wednesday.

"People went under, over, around and through every attempt we made to restrict the area. It would have taken the U.S. Army to contain what we thought was required."

At least 19 people are confirmed dead as a result of Sunday's explosive eruption and nearly 100 are missing.

When the volcano first blew steam and ash March 27, officials threw up roadblocks on the main highways and evacuated most residents on the mountain's slopes.

Later, as the northwest flank began to bulge ominously, Gov. Dixy Lee Ray ordered a 5-mile area around the mountain closed to all but scientists and police.

As the weeks went by and a major eruption failed to materialize, however, officials were deluged with demands to lift the barriers.

"We tried, we all tried the best we could and yet we couldn't totally control it," Closner said.

The sheriff said the public, particularly people who wanted to get back to their cabins at the mountain, applied pressure [illegible] they could — through letters, the media, refusing to pay taxes and even filing suits.

Just one day before the massive eruption, about 50 property owners, some toting rifles, gathered at the Toutle school and drove in [illegible] mountain. They were prepared to run the roadblock.

Mt. St. Helens Potential Hazards Are Described

A May 29 report from the Federal Coordination Office in Vancouver Federal Building discusses potential hazards from Mt. St. Helens volcanic activity. Hazards of five types were listed by D.R. Crandell of the United States Geological Survey: ashfall, mudflow, pyroclastic flow, lateral blast, and lava.

Ashfall - Large quantities of ash began to erupt May 25. The mountain is still in an explosive, eruptive state and similar eruptions of ash should be expected in the future.

Future ashfall can be expected to be a coarser-grained pumice and ash, or magma will erupt gradually to form a dome within the crater.

The latter would be expected to be accompanied by small eruptions of ash. This is expected to occur within days or weeks, with winds carrying ashfall probably to the southeast, east, or northeast.

Mudflow - Most likely to occur in the North and South Toutle River, Pine Creek and Muddy River valleys, future small mudflows are possible as streams downcut debris deposits.

Mudflows can be caused by pyroclastic flows during heavy rainfall or pyroclastic flows down snowcovered flanks of the volcano.

Existing mudflows are said to appear stable in the opinion of soil-mechanic experts.

Heavy rainfall in the Spirit Lake drainage basin could cause rainfall to overflow the debris-mud dam at the western end of the lake.

Pyroclastic Flow - Caused by eruptions, earthquakes, and volcanic explosions. Most likely to occur on the North and South Toutle and Muddy River and Pine Creek valleys. Earthquakes are now occurring around the Mt. Margaret area north of Mt. St. Helens.

Lateral Blast - Another lateral blast like that of May 18 is not likely but is possible if a dome erupts. Unless the dome rises above the present crater, the blast would strike northward.

A lateral blast with a high dome could strike in any direction.

A lateral blast about 1,200 years ago shot north six miles. Precautions are in effect, therefore, up to 12 miles for safety.

Magma also could move into the volcano at some point east, south or west of the existing crater.

Lava Flow - Eruptions like those of May 18 and May 25 are not typically accompanied by lava flows. Lava flows are possible but not probable during the next few weeks or months.