

EFFECTS OF CHILE ERUPTION COULD LAST DECADES

Contributed by Matt Malinowski
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Ash from Chaitén volcano has spread to the Atlantic
Photo courtesy of NASA

Chilean scientists warned on Wednesday that the eruption of southern Chile's Chaitén Volcano could have drastic long-term effects on the surrounding region. Officials made their remarks as Chile's National Emergency Office (ONEMI) confirmed the volcano eruption continues unabated.

"Areas now being covered with up to 40 centimeters of ash are practically lost," Universidad de Chile engineer Wilfredo Vera told Radio Cooperativa. "The ground will need much more than five years in order to recover. Decades could pass before natural vegetation begins to grow again. These areas will be starting from square one."

The eruption, which began early Friday morning, released a massive billow of ash that was visible as far away as Puerto Montt, some 200 kilometers to the north. Volcanic soot began to rain down, blanketing Chaitén and other area towns such as Futaleufu, and contaminating local water supplies (ST, May 5). NASA satellite photos released several days later showed the cloud of smoke spreading towards Argentina's Atlantic coast, located some 500 miles to the east.

The ongoing eruption intensified significantly Tuesday as authorities for the first time reported seeing lava emanating from the volcano's crater (ST, May 7). Chile's Geology Service later disclosed that the explosions caused the formation of one single crater more than 790 meters wide.

The increasing volcanic activity prompted government authorities to order the mandatory evacuation of local residents and all emergency workers within 50 kilometers of the volcano. President Michelle Bachelet designated a team of government officials, headed by Defense Minister José Goñi, to oversee the evacuation and recovery efforts.

ONEMI on Wednesday reported that a steady stream of ash and other particles was still coming from the volcano. Authorities said they were concerned about the effect the ubiquitous ash — which has contaminated local water supplies — will have on residents still in the area and on the region's estimated 40,000 head of livestock.

Environment Minister Ana Lya Uriarte disclosed a report confirming the deterioration in local water quality. The authors of the report said they detected high amounts of sulfur both in the air and water due to the falling ash. The scientists said water sources — particularly around Futaleufu — showed signs of "abnormal acidity" and that falling ash had caused a build-up of a white, pasty residue in many local tributaries.

Still, the scientists said that air quality readings taken in both Futaleufu and Chaitén showed no signs of poisonous gases. Health Minister Soledad Barria confirmed this information, but insisted that residents remaining in the area take extra precautions.

"The gases in the air are not toxic," she said. "Nevertheless, we recommend people use gas masks or wet handkerchiefs in order not to inhale the ash, which contains certain amounts of silicon and other metals."

The eruption, the first for Chaitén Volcano in recorded history, followed two days of unusual seismic activity in the zone. The phenomenon nevertheless caught residents and authorities by surprise. Indeed, government and media reports initially misidentified the eruption as coming from the Michimahuida volcano, a 2,400-meter behemoth located some 40 kilometers north-west of Chaitén. Because of severe visibility problems, authorities weren't able to clarify the true source of the blast until later Friday morning (ST, May 5).

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