

9.1 Risk Assessment

9.1.6 Windstorm: Information on 1931 Dust Storm

The Pacific Northwest Dust Storm of 1931

“(On the afternoon of Tuesday, April 21, 1931) ...the fine dust swirled and rose, filling the sky, forming a cloud that stood 4,000 to 5,000 feet high and even higher... J. T. Livermore reported that he flew 250 miles at an altitude of over 10,000 feet, and still the cockpit of his plane filled with dust... The Dalles Optimist described the drama: ‘By 6 p.m. the air was so filled with sand that a pall like unto that caused by an eclipse of the sun was spread over the land. Chickens sought their roosts.’ After the first gusts, the wind diminished to around 30 miles per hour, but it blew steadily for three days... Old-timers... reminisced about the great sandstorm of 1906 that lasted two weeks. ‘This was nothing like that, they maintained. That was a lot worse.’

It was the same all over Portland that Tuesday night. First the sky took on a yellow-red tinge; then, abruptly, winds of around 50 miles per hour began to blow. Witnesses described a huge coppery cloud that swept out of the Gorge and down on the city, spreading like a giant fan... (by Sunday it was calculated that) over three million pounds of dust had fallen on the city, enough to fill 33 freight cars... Portlanders maintained that ‘the very palpable atmosphere even tasted like turnips’... In McMinnville, a Linfield College student calculated that 48,400 pounds of dust had fallen on every square mile of land in the vicinity each day for three days.

In Albany the dust arrived late Tuesday night and was worse on Wednesday. Most of it came down the valley, although the local newspaper insisted that much had blown over the Cascades and directly into town from the east... In Roseburg, the wind gusted to only about 25 miles per hour, but the dust, which hit about 1 a.m. Wednesday was every bit as annoying as it was in more northerly places... (In its southerly travel) the dust seems to have stopped at Roseburg... but it clearly went west, following the Columbia River and ... Coos Bay reported that the sand and dust that covered everything had blown in over the Coast Range.

Captain Henry Speller of the freighter Maui... about 500 miles off the coast... could only conclude that some nearby volcano had erupted... the steamship Sacramento sailed into Gray’s Harbor... looking as if it had crossed the Sahara... At its height, the dust cloud that brought grit to Astoria stretched for nearly 1,000 miles, from more than 300 miles east of Portland to well over 500 miles out above the Pacific Ocean... Not since Krakatoa had erupted nearly 50 years before... had so much dust hung in western Oregon skies.”



Uprooted trees caused by a freak northeast gale bringing a great dust storm to Oregon, April 1931 (photo courtesy of the NOAA photo library)