

Fourteen dead, over 100 missing in Washington state landslide

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A mile-wide section of hill above Oso, a former fishing and logging town in the state of Washington (about 55 miles northeast of Seattle), broke loose Saturday morning, wiping out a section of State Route 530, and burying a neighborhood under 15 feet of mud and debris.

Fourteen people have been confirmed dead at this writing. There is confusion as to the number of missing, due to various lists that may contain duplicate names, but estimates hover at above 100. The town's total population, according to the 2010 census, is 180.

The nearby town of Darrington (16 miles east) has been cut off, and concerns have been raised about flooding due to damming resulting from the slide's blockage of the north fork of the Stillaguamish River.

Rescue efforts were hampered by quicksand-like conditions in the area, with several responders themselves having to be pulled out of shoulder-deep mud. By late Sunday, the rescue effort was abandoned and recovery became the focus as it is unlikely that further survivors would be found. The continued instability of the hillside resulted in responders being pulled back on Monday afternoon.

Bridges in the area are being monitored against flood risk, as the slide blocked the north fork of the river, and nighttime evacuation orders for the affected area are still in effect. There is no plan yet in place for clean-up as it is still unsafe to enter much of the area and it is unknown when an assessment can be made. Washington state Lieutenant Governor Brad Owen declared a state of emergency for Snohomish County.

The area has seen several serious floods and landslides over the past century. A project intended to stabilize a section just west of Saturday's slide was completed less than a year and a half ago. Known as the "Skaglund Hill Permanent Slide Repair", the WSDOT

(Washington State Department of Transportation) work spanned a half-mile segment of 530, securing a hill south of the Stillaguamish River between mile markers 36 and 37. The collapsed area is about a half mile away between mile markers 37 and 38 to the north of the river.

The project was undertaken in 2006 when a maintenance crew found a "rapidly growing crack" on the State Route due to slope movement. A retaining wall and drainage were included in the project to stabilize the hill.

More than twice the normal amount of rain had fallen in the month and a half previous to the mudslide, according to the National Weather Service, with 15 inches more rain than usual saturating the hillside. It is thought that this, along with erosion at the hill's base, reactivated the 2006 slide area where improvements had not been made.

Washington's road infrastructure received a D+ on the 2013 ASCE (American Society of Civil Engineers) Report Card. Budget shortfalls and lack of federal funding have left the state's Department of Transportation largely playing catch-up and funding projects only when, as in 2006, the roads and highways are already in noticeably dire condition.

Heavy traffic, both from passenger cars and trucks, and typically wet weather combine with geologically unstable conditions to create problems on many of the roads and highways in the state, and indeed, in the entire Pacific Northwest.

According to a report issued earlier this month by TRIP, a national transportation research group, the situation is only going to get worse. The report states, "From 2013 to 2018, WSDOT projects a shortfall of approximately \$1.2 billion between the anticipated annual budget for road, highway and bridge

preservation and reconstruction and the needed annual budget to achieve sustained improvements in the state's major roads, highways and bridges."

The TRIP report also notes that if revenue is not allocated to the Federal Highway Trust Fund by Congress, the state of Washington will see its funding for highway and transit improvements cut by \$848 million for federal fiscal year 2015 as of October 1, 2014.

As infrastructure crumbles, tax breaks have been given to Boeing to the tune of nearly \$9 billion, and the state is home to ten billionaires, including Bill Gates, who tops the Forbes 400 Richest People list with \$56 billion in assets.

Under such conditions, with massive wealth held in private hands and public spending being slashed, unstable areas around highways, freeways and in more urban areas will not receive the attention and repairs needed, and there will be further loss of life.



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