At least 18 dead in Washington mudslide, dozens still missing

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Using their own tools—and often their bare hands—to dig through the muck, responders are searching for victims of the mudslide that hit the Washington towns of Oso and Darrington on March 22. Thunder and heavy rain continued over the weekend, causing pools to form that had to be pumped out. Lookouts have been posted to monitor any further shifting on the hill and rising river levels.

Though the official death toll stands at 18 as of this writing, victims are not counted until they have been positively identified. A number of bodies have been found but not yet identified due to the difficulty of removing them from the scene and the condition of the remains, many of which are only partial. Some victims had been identified only through the use of DNA analysis.

Speaking about the the slow pace of identifying the victims, Travis Hots, fire chief for Snohomish County Fire District 21, said, "We understand there has been confusion over the reported number of fatalities. This has been a challenging process for all of us. The sadness here is that we know this number will only increase."

On Saturday the list of the missing was reduced to 30—down from the figure of 90 given earlier.

On Sunday, there were reports that the Stillaguamish River had made " a slight breech" in the dam created by the slide on the river's north fork. The National Weather Service issued a flash-flood warning. Snohomish officials lifted an evacuation order for the area, but cautioned residents to be ready to re-evacuate if the situation worsened.

Those working are often waist-deep in mud and a toxic slurry of household chemicals and septic spills as they search. Most houses in the rural area were built with septic tanks, rather than a public sewer system, and many used propane for heating and cooking. Hazmat teams have been called in to assess the safety of working in the conditions.

According to a website set up for Darrington residents, "Hypothermia and dehydration are starting to impact the searchers in the field. Fatigue and stress are also setting in. Efforts are being made to protect the health of those working in the landslide area."

Once again, a natural disaster in the United States has been made much worse by a lack of planning and infrastructure.

There is no national system to track landslide hazards. Proposals have been made to develop a program; however, the US Geological Survey (USGS) at present only monitors a handful of areas known to be susceptible to slides. It has largely been left to states to undertake surveys of the potential dangers faced by residents of coastal, mountainous or other unstable areas.

The USGSs' annual budget for landslide study has been reduced to $2.2 million. Though a seven-state study was undertaken, and Congress directed the USGS to develop a nationwide tracking system, the funds have never been made available to do so. The majority of hazard maps that have been produced have been commissioned by states or localities, with no nationally integrated or standardized method.

Publicly available information from the USGS regarding slides consists primarily of media reports of warnings from various cities and regions as they happen. The USGS web site shows warnings for western Washington due to the unusually large volume of rain through March. Several slides of lesser magnitudes than that which hit Oso are documented, including in such relatively urban areas as Kirkland, Washington, about 55 miles away.

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Maps and clear interpretations of threats for public use are often not available. Oso resident Robin Youngblood, whose house was destroyed by the March 22 slide, told the Associated Press that Snohomish County officials did not inform her about the dangers of the hillside. “They knew that this mountain was unstable and they let people build there. This shouldn’t have happened.”

Studies made in 1999 by the Army Corps of Engineers and in 2010 by Snohomish County both showed a huge potential for a catastrophic event occurring along the hillside above Oso and Darrington. Mudslides in the area had been documented for close to a century—with the last major slide being as recent as 2006.

The primary author of the 1999 Army Corps report, geomorphologist Daniel Miller said that on visiting the site after the 2006 slide, he was surprised to find people rebuilding. “Frankly,” he said in an interview with the *Seattle Times*, “I was shocked that the county permitted any building across from the river. We’ve known that [the hill has] been failing.” He noted that, “It’s not unknown that this hazard exists.”

“This landslide moves every year when it gets wet, and pieces fall off,” Miller told the *Washington Post*. This month saw record rains in the region.

The *Post* explained the particular confluence of circumstances that produced the disaster: “An ancient glacier is jutting out of the mountain, making its flat plateau unstable, Miller said. The Stillaguamish River was eroding it from below. Rows of conifer trees that helped to mitigate erosion by sucking water through their roots and releasing it into the atmosphere were chopped down by loggers. Rain fell on the bald spots they left, drenching dirt and sand, making the mountain even more precarious…. It was a nightmare waiting to happen.”

Home construction was allowed despite the clearly dangerous conditions in the area. Building permits are issued by various localities, not all of which have made studies of landslide hazards. Not all regions where studies have been conducted take steps to limit or prohibit growth, either residential or commercial. Rural areas are particularly prone to allow growth to continue in hopes of generating larger tax revenue.

The granting of permits for logging in the hills above the Stillaguamish River, and Snohomish County officials’ decision to grant permits for rebuilding, have proven deadly.

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