

# What happened to the highway?

Man has rude awakening on his early morning commute

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A landslide forced a temporary closure of State Route 129 Thursday morning near Boggan's Oasis at the bottom of Rattlesnake Grade, about 40 miles south of Lewiston.

**RATTLESNAKE GRADE** - A Clearwater Paper employee who was driving to work early Thursday encountered a huge wall of mud and uprooted trees blocking State Route 129.

Shannon Beach, 36, who lives on Buford Ridge in Oregon, said he couldn't believe what was in his headlights at 4:40 a.m. after he crossed the bridge by Boggan's Oasis on the Grande Ronde River.

Instead of a highway, the bottom of Rattlesnake Grade had transformed into a swirling mass of logs, dirt and debris. A small bridge over Rattlesnake Creek was completely wiped out and was sitting upstream in the Grande Ronde River.

"I drive this road every day," Beach said. "It was the craziest thing I've ever seen."

Beach said he headed home to notify the Asotin County Sheriff's Office and transportation officials about the slide, and to let his boss know he'd be late for work.

Ronnie Mock, maintenance supervisor for the Washington State Department of Transportation, arrived a short time later.

"We had to cut logs with a chain saw just to get a vehicle through," Mock said at the scene, about 30 miles south of Asotin. "Some of those logs will probably wind up downstream in the Snake River."

By mid-morning, state crews had one lane of the highway cleared, but it will take a week or more to clean up the damage, Mock said. Luckily, the area's main bridge over the Grande Ronde was not damaged.

Behind Mock stood a pile of skinned trees about 20 feet tall and 70-feet wide. The power of the slide uprooted a thick alder stand, peeled back the bark and took out cattle gates and fencing on a steep hillside near the road.

The log jam picked up rocks and blocked the highway as it made its way down the creek corridor toward the Grande Ronde. The final punch blew out the private metal bridge.

A portion of the highway at the bottom of the winding, aptly-named grade was closed for a few hours until a path was cleared. Pilot cars then assisted motorists through a curvy, 1.5-mile stretch of debris as road crews tackled the mess.

"It's right up to the edge of the pavement in a couple of places," Mock said. "We're hoping no one was in its path. So far, there is no sign of any victims."

Later Thursday, Shannon Beach brought his parents, Tom and Laura Beach, down from their ranch on the ridge to survey the damage.

"I call it Mother Nature," said 62-year-old rancher Tom Beach. "The only woman I'd never marry."

The area has had its fair share of weather-related drama in recent months, from ice jams on the Grande Ronde to flooding on county roads.

The latest gully washer was likely caused by a heavy rain that pelted the area Wednesday night and early Thursday, said residents gathered at Boggan's Oasis. Snow was falling at Fields Spring State Park near Anatone a few days ago, and all that water had to go somewhere.

"It rained so hard last night, we still have standing water on top of the ground," Tom Beach said.

An exact time of the slide is tough to pinpoint, but officials said it must have been an impressive incident, based on the aftermath.

"I would've liked to have seen it," Mock said. "I'd really like to know how that small bridge got upstream."

Shannon Beach said he's thankful he wasn't caught up in the powerful mud ball.

"I'm usually on the road 10 minutes earlier," he said. "When I got down here today, there was no highway left. It was quite a sight."