

Beat: News

Death toll from Washington landslide reaches 27, others still missing

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USPA News - The death toll from the devastating landslide that wiped out a small community in Washington state has risen to 27 after rescue workers recovered the remains of three more people, officials said on late Monday, but more than a dozen others are still believed to be missing. The Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office said it had received a total of 24 victims from the March 22 landslide by late Monday, of which 19 bodies had been positively identified.

Six of the victims, including a 4-month-old girl, were identified on Monday, though one of the names was not immediately released pending notification of next-of-kin. But county officials said three additional victims were discovered at the scene during Monday's operations, putting the total number of fatalities at 27. Another 22 people were officially listed as missing but authorities noted that the eight unidentified bodies are likely to belong to missing people, meaning as many as 14 people could still be missing. "We want to do all we can to find them and give some closure to their families," said Snohomish County Executive Director Gary Haakenson. The increase in temperatures, clear skies and positive forecast through Wednesday have improved working conditions in the one-square-mile (2.5-square-kilometer) debris field, though some rescue workers and volunteers have taken a break as the lengthy operation has turned into a recovery effort. "The greatest challenge is working in areas with standing water. Dogs have indicated there are human remains in areas where there is standing water, so in addition to the good weather drying out the area, water is being pumped out," a county spokesperson said on late Monday. With the numbers of searchers dwindling significantly over the weekend, authorities have requested additional search and rescue personnel to continue looking for victims. Nine dogs and their handlers were working at the site on Monday, and more veterinarians were brought in to help keep the dogs in good shape after two of them suffered from hypothermia on Sunday. "The dogs need periodic breaks to help restore their keen sense of smell," the county spokesperson said. "Although the dogs can smell up to 10 feet (3 meters) deep, the debris field is as deep as 60 to 75 feet (18.2 to 22.8 meters) in some places. In many places it is 15 to 25 feet (4.5 to 7.6 meters) deep." The Snohomish County Sheriff's Office on Monday also released the names of people who continue to be listed as missing, including four children aged 2, 4, 13 and 13. The list was revised down from 30 on Saturday to 22 on Monday but mostly because some bodies that had previously been recovered were identified as missing persons. "Detectives have carefully reviewed each of these cases based on available information and conversations with family members. It is presumed that the people on this list are missing in connection with the landslide," the 530 Slide Joint Information Center said in a news release. The devastating landslide happened at about 10:37 a.m. local time on March 22 and struck an area of State Route 530 in Oso, between Arlington and Darrington, in Snohomish County. The slide wiped out a small community with dozens of homes, but no survivors have been found since the day of the landslide. U.S. President Barack Obama signed an emergency declaration for Washington state on March 24 and ordered federal aid to supplement state and local response efforts in the affected area. Obama later approved a request for an amended federal emergency declaration, allowing local government agencies and non-profits to recover costs of emergency protective measures, emergency response, and debris removal from the federal government.

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