

# The Seattle Times

To the Pulitzer judges:

Two days after a landslide near Oso, Wash., killed 43 people, the county's head of emergency management said the slide was unforeseeable: "This came out of nowhere. No warning."

The day after those words were spoken, The Seattle Times revealed how there had been a litany of warnings, going back seven decades. A report written for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had even warned of the "potential for a large catastrophic failure." That story was the first in a string of exposés, in which The Times merged breaking news with investigative reporting to dissect the state's worst natural disaster since the eruption of Mount St. Helens.

It was 10:37 a.m., Saturday, March 22, when the hillside above Steelhead Haven collapsed. Within 60 seconds, the neighborhood vanished, consumed by the thunderous wall of earth that jumped the Stillaguamish River and tore through its homes at 60 mph. Some houses exploded. Others were ripped from their foundations only to be swallowed in a sea of churning mud. It would be weeks before authorities could confirm that 43 men, women and children had perished in one of the worst natural disasters in state history.

The Seattle Times mobilized quickly, as reporters mined government records, databases, historical archives and even a geologist's personal files.

On a sensitive story involving extraordinary loss, The Times broke one story after another, writing of lapses at the top of the hill, at the bottom of the hill, and at another hill 15 miles away.

In quick succession, The Times revealed that 1) the state allowed logging on a plateau above the hill, despite warnings that the trees intercepted and absorbed water bound for the unstable slope; 2) one logging company harvested timber in a sensitive area designated off-limits; and 3) the state used outdated boundaries to regulate logging, leading to clear-cutting on land that would otherwise have been protected. The reporting for these stories required sophisticated mapping and geographical analysis; among other steps, we cross-referenced aerial photos and utilized lidar imagery, which exposes landscape beneath vegetation.

We also looked at the bottom of the hill, where the state helped fund a log barrier to isolate the hill from the river. That crib wall, built in 2006, required repeated repairs. When it was overrun by the 2014 slide, it joined a series of other control structures that the state had spent millions on over the years, only to see them wash away.

Our local coverage juxtaposed the drumbeat of warnings about the slope with the lack of disclosure to the residents who lived nearby. Ten years before this devastating slide, the county considered buying up the properties near the hill, but elected instead to try to stabilize it. Property owners who survived the landslide said they weren't aware that the county had explored such a plan and were outraged to learn that officials hadn't fully shared concerns with them. Two years after considering the buyout, the county allowed new home construction in the neighborhood.

We also discovered that 15 miles away, the U.S. Forest Service kept open a popular campground even though it was below another hill with a long history of landslides. When we wrote about this other hill – and all of its eerie parallels to the Oso bluff that fell – the federal government closed the campground, pending a safety study that is still ongoing.

With its stunning mountains, forests, rivers and coastlines, Washington is a land that inspires wonder as it poses unpredictable peril. Central to its soul is a debate over how people should use its land. Reporters explored these themes in stories that questioned whether Steelhead Haven, and other developments like it, should have ever been built. The questions we raised are still being debated in Snohomish County, where the landslide occurred, nearly a year later. County officials have promised to apply lessons from Oso when they rewrite the county's critical-areas regulations this year, but already have rejected a moratorium on building in landslide-prone areas.

The state also has acted. In November, the Washington Forest Practices Board adopted new guidelines that limit logging on unstable slopes, such as the one above Steelhead Haven. Timber companies that want to cut trees in sensitive areas may now be required to submit additional geologic studies before they are issued permits. By the year's end, a state commission made 17 separate recommendations based on the Oso disaster designed to identify and reduce landslide risks and improve the response when disaster strikes.

As for the survivors of the landslide along Highway 530 in Oso, one of our reporters found them six months after the disaster still lost and mourning, but finding strength in the kindness of others and among themselves. Our coverage continues.

For thorough, sustained, innovative local reporting on an issue of compelling community interest, we are proud to nominate our Oso landslide coverage for your consideration for the Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathy Best', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Kathy Best  
Editor