

Pemberton area evacuation order rescinded, slide classified as second-largest ever in Canada

BY JESSE FERRERAS, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 7, 2010



The slide path of the avalanche from the Capricorn Glacier near Meager Creek, August 6, 2010.

Photograph by: Bonny Makarewicz, Special to the Sun

PEMBERTON - The evacuation order for areas around Pemberton has now been rescinded and the major landslide that earlier sparked fears of major flooding in the valley has been classified as the second largest in Canadian history, officials are learning today.

Pemberton Mayor Jordan Sturdy told The Sun that geotechnicians assessing the slide estimated that the slide, triggered by the melting Capricorn Glacier on 65 kilometres north of Pemberton unleashed a 40-million-cubic-metre wall of rock and debris that was 300-metres wide and two-kilometres long.

The slide, which struck at 5:30 a.m. Friday morning, swept down Capricorn Creek and formed a dam on Meager Creek that also partially blocked the Lillooet River. A 10-km lake formed behind the dam initially raising fears that it might collapse under the water pressure causing major flooding downstream.

However, 24-40-metre-wide incision formed in the dam allowing water to flow naturally out of the lake and approximately three-million cubic metres of water that had backed up behind the dam drained by Saturday morning's assessment.

"I think it's fair to say we dodged a bullet to some degree," Sturdy said. "We were fortunate in that it incised in a way that allowed the discharge to be of a moderate nature."

Ryan Wainwright, the regional district's emergency program manager said in an interview that officials had expected the dam to collapse Friday night. He said there was some release of water, but it did not prove to be catastrophic.

At its height, Sturdy said, the Lillooet River reached about 3.7 metres at around 7:30 a.m. Saturday, but by 11 a.m. had receded to 3.4 metres dropping 0.3 metres in a single hour. Sturdy insists the water that initially posed a threat is gone.

Debris from the slide blocked access to the main road into a popular hiking and camping area 35 km north of Pemberton.

With the threat averted, authorities will now turn their attention to what happens with the Meager Creek Forest Service Road, the only access road to Meager Creek Hot Springs, a popular tourist destination.

A bridge along the road that traverses Miller Creek is "out of commission," Sturdy said, with one of three spans gone and another shifted out of place. He said B.C.'s Ministry of Forests and Range will have to decide whether it wants to fix it. Last time the bridge washed out, in a massive flood in 2003, it took as many as six years to fix it.

Friday night's evacuation order pressed 1,500 people from their homes in the Pemberton area who were taken to emergency centres in Squamish and Whistler Friday night.

In the meantime, the RCMP has established a roadblock at the Miller Creek bridge to prevent anyone who is not a resident from entering the evacuation zone.

Residents of the Pemberton Meadows, a lush farming valley that stretches about 20 kilometres north of the town centre, were taken to Spruce Grove Field House in Whistler if they chose to leave. Others were asked to report immediately to a reception centre at Brennan Park Community Centre in Squamish, to receive further information about temporary lodgings.

However, although the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District has issued evacuation order, residents may well choose to stay in their homes.

The SLRD cannot force them to leave.

This is the second consecutive summer that Meadows residents have been placed on evacuation order. Last summer they were caught between two major forest fires on the Camel's Back and Copperdome mountains. Then, as now, some residents have chosen to stay.

The Helmer family of Helmer's Organic Farm, 15 kilometres up Pemberton Meadows is one of those that has chosen to stay because, as Jennie Helmer told The Sun, they've lived through worse.

"We've had floods going by our doorways," she said. "We have canoes and boats and we have animals that we need to take care of," she said.

"This is our home, we're not just going to leave because something might happen."

However, she and her family are keeping an eye on the Lillooet River and have watched it go up and down since last night, but so far they haven't witnessed any flooding.

"The Lillooet River is fluctuating in it's height and width a lot," she said. "Starting yesterday afternoon we started watching it, it went up quickly, up and down, and now it's about six feet over normal."

Connie Sobchak, a lifelong resident of the Pemberton Meadows, was attending a family reunion at her parents' home in the area when the call came to evacuate at about 12:30 am Saturday morning.

Family members were sleeping in tents in the homestead's backyard when officials working with the SLRD knocked at the door of the family home to notify them of the order.

Many family members heeded the warning and left but Sobchak and her parents, Elmer and Ruth Hellevang, refused the order, having stayed home through two major forest fires last summer.

"It was pretty scary," Sobchak said, relieved that all safety concerns with the slide had been alleviated.

"I just said that I wasn't going to leave and we've had lots of discussions about it here at the farm, so we just went about our business. I actually went back to sleep."

Meanwhile Susie Gimse, director of Area C of the SLRD, which includes the Pemberton Meadows, was on her own family reunion on Savary Island on the Sunshine Coast when she heard about the landslide.

She had a sleepless night before coming back to Pemberton Saturday morning and was relieved as well to learn the evacuation order was

lifted.

"We've had our fair share of catastrophes," she said, ostensibly referring to last summer's forest fires and the 2003 flood.

"I think we're the luckiest community in the nation today."

Marty van Loon, a farmer who owns a Meadows property at the start of the Hurley River Forest Service Road, went up in a helicopter with

some neighbours to see the slide for himself.

He and a group of five paid \$900 together to fly up and see the slide's aftermath.

He said the scale of the slide in person went far beyond anything he'd seen on TV.

"We're out of the danger but I would say there's still a lot of risk up there," van Loon said. "I think it's very important now that officials continue monitoring the river channel for debris buildup and water cooling and whatnot, and monitoring the mountain for more parts of the mountain coming down and blocking the streams again."

Van Loon forestry officials had only done sporadic monitoring of the mountain before and that no one could have predicted a slide of this volume.

With files from Andrea Woo, Jes Abeita and Kelly Sinoski, Vancouver Sun

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