

A southeast Alaska community wrestles with a deadly landslide's impact

March 20 2024, by Becky Bohrer



This photo provided by Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management shows a helicopter arriving near mile 11 of the Zimovia Highway where ground teams, including search and rescue dogs, are actively working to search areas that state geologists have determined safe for entry Wednesday, Nov. 22, 2023, in Wrangell, Alaska, following a massive landslide earlier in the week. Credit: Willis Walunga/Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management via AP, File

Jamie Roberts and her husband felt lucky when they found an A-frame cabin on forest-draped Wrangell Island in southeast Alaska, where they could settle on a few acres and have some chickens.

A stretch of highway a few miles north, the only road into town, did make her nervous; there, waterfalls cascaded and rocks tumbled from towering bluffs on stormy days. But she always felt safe at her home of more than 20 years.

That all changed the night of Nov. 20 after [heavy rains](#), when a torrent of earth and trees rushed down a mountainside next to their home, cutting a swath to the sea. It killed six people, including a family of five; demolished two houses; and buried the highway.

The landslide lacked the scale of one that erased a neighborhood in Oso, Washington, 10 years ago this Friday. But it, too, left a community unmoored, wondering whether the dramatic landscape above was as permanent as it once seemed.

Roberts and her family have moved from their home and only returned for brief visits.

"I don't know that we'd ever sleep very well going back there," she said.

In some ways, life in Wrangell, a former logging town, is returning to normal. The summer tourism and seafood processing seasons are approaching, and the boys' varsity basketball team this month competed at state. The highway has been rebuilt.



This photo provided by the U.S. Coast Guard shows the aftermath of a landslide in Wrangell, Alaska on Tuesday, Nov. 21, 2023. Credit: U.S. Coast Guard photo via AP, File

But trees and other debris still dotted the tidelands and lower portions of the snow-covered scar on a recent day.

That scar is visible from the driveway of Stephen Todd's waterfront home. Todd, his wife and their dog, Festus, moved back last month after staying closer to town after the slide.

"There were no signs of instability" on that slope before, said Todd, a biologist. "I mean, it's steep country, but every place is steep country in southeast Alaska." He and his wife won't stay in their home when the

forecast calls for intense rain.

Rain is a part of life in the region, most of which is nestled in the Tongass National Forest, a temperate rainforest. Communities have long co-existed with landslide risks: In Alaska's capital, Juneau, the downtown core and tourist district are built into or are at the base of mountains. Thousands of landslides have been documented in the Tongass, though relatively few have been fatal.



The town of Wrangell, Alaska, where many of the community's residents live, is shown on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer

But as the climate continues to warm, intense rains are expected to

become more frequent in the region and other parts of the West Coast, heightening landslide risk. Researchers have blamed atmospheric rivers for landslides in southeast Alaska that killed three people in Sitka in 2015 and two in Haines in 2020.

After the Wrangell landslide, the state set up a drone operation and weather instruments on Roberts' property to help officials identify warning signs. A second weather station is planned for the ridgeline above.

State and federal agencies hope to see more high-elevation weather stations installed in the region. The National Weather Service would like to use soil analyses from geologists to better understand how much rain it takes to increase a community's landslide risk and incorporate that into weather alerts, said senior hydrologist Aaron Jacobs. But the work is intensive, and pulling it together will likely take years.



The northern end of Wrangell, Alaska, where many of the community's residents live, is shown on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. The northern end of the island is also where the airport and ferry terminal are located. The road into town, Zimovia Highway, careens along the island's western edge. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer

Wrangell is considering an online dashboard for residents that would use weather data to broadly assess landslide risk, similar to [one developed](#) after the Sitka slide, said Mason Villarma, Wrangell's interim borough manager. Most of Wrangell's roughly 2,040 people live on the north end of the island. But many homes farther out, along the highway, are built on slopes.

"We can't tell people whether their property is safe or not. We want to

definitely provide them the tools to make good decisions," Villarma said.

Killed in November were Timothy and Beth Heller, along with their daughters Mara, 16, and Kara, 11. Their son Derek, 12, has not been found. Otto Florschutz, a neighbor, also died. His wife, Christina, survived.

Roberts, who coached Kara and Derek's swim club, plans to participate in a race Kara wanted to do, in her honor. The club celebrated what would have been Derek's 13th birthday recently with 13 laps, cupcakes and belly flops—things he would have loved, she said.



This photo provided by the Alaska Department of Public Safety shows the landslide that occurred the previous evening near Wrangell, Alaska, on Nov. 21, 2023. Authorities have recovered the body of one of two people who had been

missing following the landslide. Credit: Alaska Department of Public Safety via AP, File



What appears to be a sweater is snagged on branches on debris of the site of a deadly landslide on Tuesday, Feb. 27, 2024, in Wrangell, Alaska. In some ways, life in the small southeast Alaska community is returning to normal after the November 2023 landslide, but in others, the recovery is far from complete. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer



Snow on Tuesday, Feb. 27, 2024, covers the site of a deadly landslide in Wrangell, Alaska. In some ways, life in the small southeast Alaska community is returning to normal after the November 2023 landslide, but in others, the recovery is far from complete. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer



Mason Villarma, Wrangell, Alaska's interim borough manager, is shown on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024, in Wrangell, Alaska, at the site of a deadly landslide. Villarma says Wrangell is considering an online dashboard for residents that would use weather data to broadly assess landslide risk. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer



Jamie Roberts poses on Tuesday, Feb. 27, 2024, in Wrangell, Alaska, with a photo board that includes pictures of Derek and Kara Heller, two of the six people who died in the landslide that hit in November 2023. Kara, 11, and Derek, 12, were part of the swim club that Roberts coaches. Derek and Kara's parents, Timothy and Beth Heller, and sister Mara also perished. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer



Snow-covered trees frame Jamie Roberts' home near the site of last fall's landslide in Wrangell, Alaska, on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Roberts and her family decided not to return to live in their house after the nearby landslide in November 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer



Debris is shown in the tidelands at the site of last fall's landslide in Wrangell, Alaska, on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. The deadly November 2023 landslide barreled down a mountain and to the water. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer



Snow on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024, covers the site of a deadly landslide in Wrangell, Alaska. In some ways, life in the small southeast Alaska community is returning to normal after the November 2023 landslide, but in others, the recovery is far from complete. Credit: AP Photo/Becky Bohrer

For a long time, the sound of planes overhead upset Roberts: She thought the noise of the landslide was a jet that was about to crash. Until recently, she would close her eyes or bow her head to avoid seeing the scar on brief visits home to gather personal items.

The family moved four times in the days after the [landslide](#). They need to be out of their current rental by April 1 but haven't been able to find another house on the island they can afford. They anticipate having to sell their home and move out of state later this year.

Roberts has mixed feelings about selling. She'd be devastated if another family bought the home, only to suffer tragedy.

"Now I'm at the phase where I'm like, 'It's not fair,'" she said. "But we get to make the choice of what comes next. And other people didn't."

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