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Accident: Chugach State Park

Location: Bird Flats, Seward Highway

DATE	ACTIVITY	FATALITIES
Tue, February 1st, 2000	Other	1
SUMMARY		
3 bulldozer operators clearing road caught, 1 killed		
Accident Report		

Slide kills railroad employee Bulldozer blasted into Inlet
By RICHARD MAUER
Anchorage Daily News reporter

Laboring in the most extreme avalanche conditions in decades, an Alaska Railroad worker assisting highway crews at a slide near Bird Flats on the Seward Highway suffered fatal injuries Tuesday when a second avalanche fell from the mountains and crushed him.

Kerry Brookman, 53, a heavy equipment operator with the railroad for 21 years, died Tuesday evening after being airlifted to Providence Alaska Medical Center and spending most of the afternoon in surgery. He suffered a crushed pelvis, internal injuries and bleeding.

Brookman, operating a bulldozer, was working with two other state highway bulldozer operators when the second avalanche struck about 12:30 p.m. Brookman's 35,000-pound D6 Caterpillar was carried about 400 feet into Turnagain Arm, its cab crushed. The deadly turn to what had been two days of inconvenience and hassle led officials to once again abandon efforts to clear the Seward Highway for the day. They couldn't predict when the road would reopen.

Girdwood remained cut off from both sides by about a dozen avalanches, including at least three that fell Tuesday. Some of the slides were more than 1,000 feet wide and over 10 feet deep. The current wave of avalanches began Sunday evening. Conditions could even worsen today, with above-freezing temperatures, possible rain and winds of 80 mph with gusts to 100 predicted from Turnagain Arm to the Anchorage Hillside.

The Anchorage School District canceled classes for its 49,000 students on Tuesday because subdivision roads all over town were still buried in snow, making it difficult for buses to get in and out, said Steve Kalmes, the district's transportation director. He said the district will be watching the weather later in the week, too, in case high winds and warm temperatures make the roads dangerous.

The Girdwood K-8 school will remain closed today. State officials urged people to refrain from highway or off-road travel and said the potential was very high for additional avalanches in Cordova, Valdez, Seward, Hope, Cooper Landing, Anchorage and Eagle River. "We really want to caution folks: If they don't have to be out, if there's any way they can avoid traveling, they really shouldn't do it," said director David Liebersbach of the Alaska Division of Emergency Services.

A fresh slide blocked Eklutna Lake Road at Mile 5.7 sometime between 5:30 p.m and 6 p.m in an area not prone to avalanches because it's so well forested, said Chugach State Park Superintendent Al Meiners. The slide, which stranded several snowmachiners and about a dozen residents, is a sign of just how bad conditions have become, he said. "There are no slide paths across that road - now there is," Meiners said. "It's bad now and it's going to get worse."

The Old Glenn Highway was closed by a new avalanche Tuesday night at Mile 7.5, and another slide closed the Glenn Highway at Mile 95 near the Matanuska Glacier, state troopers reported. Earlier Tuesday, nine people stranded in their cars overnight between two avalanches south of Girdwood were rescued by an Alaska Air National Guard HH-60 Pavhawk helicopter. They arrived in two loads at Kulis Air Guard Base in Anchorage, at 10:05 a.m. and 10:55 a.m. Ten others who had been trapped for hours at the Portage railroad depot were freed Monday night when a heavy equipment operator broke through.

Dozens of travelers remain stranded at Girdwood, where they're holing up at the local school, at bed and breakfasts and the Alyeska Prince Hotel. Others sat it out at the Tesoro gas station at the Girdwood turnoff, hoping the road might open. Several were on their way to Anchorage for medical treatment. Among them were Soldotna residents Mariel Taylor, 10, and her mom, Sandra Udelhoven-Taylor. "Yesterday was pre-op," Sandra said. "I have been calling and (the doctor) has moved it to Thursday, if we get through by then." Both Sandra and Mariel slept in the Tesoro parking lot on Monday night.

Highway officials, facing the likelihood that they won't break through to Girdwood until at least Thursday, were discussing turning the straight stretch of highway near the Girdwood turnoff into an emergency airstrip to bring in supplies and allow people to leave. They also considered focusing all efforts on clearing the Girdwood airport, which was buried in snow. "I went around and kind of assessed how much food we have here in the grocery stores," said Trooper Sgt. Lee Oly, of Girdwood. "They're running low on milk and fresh fruit and stuff, but the shelves seemed pretty well stocked with everything else."

Edie Handsaker, from Kenai, was driving up to Anchorage with her husband, who was supposed to undergo knee surgery this week. Handsaker was also delivering a Rottweiler puppy to a friend. "We named (the dog) Avalanche," she said as she stood smoking a cigarette outside the Tesoro station. Avalanche, the dog, was snuck into the Alyeska Prince Hotel on Sunday and Monday, but was going to stay at a Girdwood resident's house on Tuesday night, she said.

State highway officials started the day with different plans. Joe Perkins, commissioner of the state Department of Transportation, invited reporters to the Bird Flats avalanche, about 30 miles south of downtown Anchorage, where he hoped to put on a victory-at-hand demonstration at 2 p.m. During the morning, a helicopter bombed the hillside's chutes with explosives to trigger avalanches from any remaining snow.

Terry Onslow, an avalanche forecaster for the Transportation Department, told workers it was safe to begin clearing the 10-foot to 15-foot snow from the highway, officials said. But the wind quickly picked up, blowing snow back into avalanche-prone chutes. "When we started, it was dead calm," said Bill Mowl, an Anchorage district transportation superintendent.

"An hour later, it went to hell." The new avalanche roared down a famed chute called Five Fingers, Onslow said. Dave Hamre, an avalanche expert with the Alaska Railroad, was flying above the area in a chartered ERA helicopter at the time of the slide and had also thought it safe to work, said Ernie Piper, an assistant vice president for the railroad.

According to Piper, Hamre and the pilot spotted the bulldozer that Brookman, the railroad worker, had been operating. Brookman's body was buried by snow, but they saw his hand sticking out, waving. The helicopter landed on the snow near Brookman and Hamre and the pilot pulled him out and loaded him aboard. They flew him directly to the hospital.

At 2 p.m., instead of hosting the media at an active worksite, Commissioner Perkins was sitting in the passenger seat of a Ford Expedition, the effort abandoned. "We were going to let people get down in there to see where we were clearing," Perkins told a reporter. "We thought it was safe."

* Daily News reporters Karen Aho, Molly Brown, Tony Hopfinger, S.J. Komarnitsky, Elizabeth Manning, Doug O'Harra, Natalie Phillips and Peter Porco contributed to this story

With no time to escape, workers braced for slide
By NATALIE PHILLIPS and CRAIG MEDRED
Anchorage Daily News reporters

Larry Bushnell saw it coming. Just seconds before another avalanche ripped down on the Seward Highway on Tuesday afternoon, a spotter radioed him and two other state bulldozer operators working in the Bird Flats area. The message: Get out and get out now. But how do you prepare for an avalanche blast with only a few seconds warning?

There weren't many choices, Bushnell recalled later. All three spun their bulldozers to face the mountain and lifted their blades in the air to absorb the brunt of the avalanche. "I could hear the windows starting to crackle and shatter," Bushnell said. "Then one popped and so did the others. There was so much pressure."

Bushnell, who works for the state Department of Transportation, was belted in his seat. He said he turned his face to the left, taking the force of the pounding snow with his right side. The blast of air ripped off his glasses and radio headset. "At one point, I couldn't breathe," he recalled. "I was gasping for air. I thought I was a goner. It didn't move the dozer, but I felt like I was being ripped out of it."

When the snow settled, Bushnell was cemented in a field of snow that leveled at his chest. He looked over at the Caterpillar that had been working 50 feet to his right. It had vanished. The snow pummeled that bulldozer so hard it was pushed several hundred feet onto the Turnagain Arm mud flats, and flipped over. The driver, Kerry Brookman, an employee of the Alaska Railroad, was quickly airlifted out by a helicopter. He died Tuesday night at Providence Alaska Medical Center.

The third Caterpillar, driven by the DOT's John Rajek, was 50 yards from the other two bulldozers and was only dusted. Phil Walczak, a cameraman for KTUU-Channel 2, had been videotaping the Caterpillars. Moments before the avalanche, Rajek, the bulldozer driver, saw the photographer scramble toward a KTUU vehicle. "I saw the photographer running," he said, "and I thought, 'What the hell is going on?' " Then, he said, the DOT spotter screamed over the headphones: "Avalanche! Avalanche! Avalanche!"

Inside the KTUU car, reporter Laura Pappetti looked up and saw the snow coming down. "It looked like everything was in slow motion," Pappetti said. "Then it hit the car." The car shook, but the snow was shallow on the edge of the avalanche. Closer to the middle, where Rajek was working, it was deeper but he was able to walk away.

The other two Cat drivers weren't so lucky. The avalanche, Rajek said, caught Bushnell's Cat in the front and blasted out the windows. "The only thing that saved him was that he was wearing his seat belt." The seat belt held Bushnell in place as the avalanche swept through and over the Cat. Brookman was in much worse shape. The avalanche rolled his 35,000-pound D6 Cat out onto the mud flats, with the snow crashing through the cab, tearing his clothing.

Yet when the avalanche ended and the snow began to settle, Pappetti said it appeared at first that everyone had come through fine. "I was trying to wave to the guys in the Cats to see if everybody was OK," she said. "I thought they were waving back." It took her a second to realize that Bushnell was trapped and waving for help. She ran to him. "I got over there and his leg was stuck, stuck pretty bad (in snow)," she said. "He was calm. He told me to be careful because there was broken glass everywhere."

She started digging with her hands, worried about getting Bushnell out, worried about another avalanche coming down. She couldn't believe how hard the avalanche had compacted the snow. "It's solid as a rock," she said. "It just packs in everywhere." Said Bushnell: "We didn't have anything but our hands. I was very packed in." Bushnell found the radio headset and was able to report to coworkers that he was OK. "They wanted to know about the other guy," Bushnell said. "A helicopter was already rescuing him."

Pappetti finally had to get help from someone with a shovel to free Bushnell. Work on the road was immediately shut down and Bushnell headed to his Bird Creek home, just a few miles away. He said he suffered cuts and bruised ribs, and decided to go to an Anchorage hospital emergency room to get checked out. Later in the afternoon, avalanche expert Doug Fesler flew over the site returning from a trip to assess power line damage along Turnagain Arm and on the Kenai Peninsula. The bulldozer in the Inlet "looked like a beer can kicked out there," he said. It was upside down with its treads in the air.

Based on the avalanche path and debris, Fesler estimated the avalanche roared across the highway at between 100 and 125 mph. "Getting hit by the wind is like getting hit with a fist," Fesler said. "Getting hit by a powder blast is like getting hit by a fist with lead fill."

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