

Wenatchee slide buries 2 people

By The Associated Press

WENATCHEE — Bulldozers labored Friday to find two people — a 5-year-old boy and a worker — caught in a rockslide that dumped tons of debris on a gravel pit and a nearby highway.

"Everyone else got out," said Chelan County Deputy Sheriff John Sanborn.

A shaken worker, Matt Bakken, 23, of Spokane, was still at the site hours later, trembling in the sunshine, saying he wanted to be on hand when the two missing people were found.

"There's still a chance they could be alive," he said.

There was no warning, Bakken said: "I didn't hear anything. The crusher was running and we all had earplugs in."

The midmorning slide buried 200 feet of the southbound lanes of Highway 97A 30 feet deep where it runs through hills along the Columbia River north of this Chelan County community.

There was no indication any passing vehicles were caught by the slide. The focus was on the gravel pit, owned by Morrill Asphalt of Wenatchee, where subcontractor Lloyd Logging of Twisp had been crushing rock.

The 5-year-old, son of a woman employed at the site, was last seen in a modified bus being used as a lab and office, said Deputy Sheriff Mike Harum.

The boy's mother "was standing out by the road and when it started to slide she turned around and saw the child standing in the doorway of the bus," he said.

"She just couldn't get to him," Harum said, adding the mother had been treated for shock.

Also missing was the quarry manager, last seen in the control room of a rock crusher at the opposite end of the worksite, Harum said.

He did not release the names of the two missing people. The Wenatchee World newspaper identified the man as Tim Grace of Spokane.



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A huge rockslide Friday at a gravel pit that sent tons of debris onto a highway north of Wenatchee.

Asked whether they could have survived, Harum said: "At this point it's a very slight possibility."

A trailer and four frontloaders unearthed at the site were crushed and in pieces.

"The experts say dirt is like snow and it's like an avalanche in that everything has slid forward, so we don't know exactly where everything is," said Rick West, an incident commander with the Chelan County fire department.

"We're trying to stabilize the upper part of the hillside with Caterpillars and frontloaders, and we're digging out at the bottom," where the two missing people were believed to be, Harum said.

The Chelan County Public Utility District was stringing lights so the effort could continue through the night. The cause of the slide was not

known. It moved at least a million cubic feet of silt, sand gravel and boulders — about 100,000 truckloads, said Dick Anderson, director of the county roads department.

He said the area traditionally is unstable. Asked why the excavation was permitted, Anderson said: "It's always dangerous. But there are ways to do it safely."

The site had been worked for 10 years, but there had been increasing activity in recent months, deputies said.

Bakken said he was "right at the base of the mountain" in a front-loader when the slide hit.

"I just got done putting a scoop in the feeder (that carries rock to the rock-crusher) and the next thing I knew I was sliding down sideways," Bakken said. "At first I thought it was just a little landslide but it just kept

going and going."

He said he and the big machine were pushed 170 yards. His front-loader — one of the battered hulks emerging from the debris — was buried up to the cab, and he was able to escape.

When it was over, Bakken said, he and the other surviving workers "just tried to figure out where people were and who was unaccounted for."

They determined two of the eight at the scene were missing.

Officials of Morrill Asphalt and Lloyd Logging could not be reached immediately for comment.

"All our crews are out there" helping to clear the debris, said Carol Hardy, a Morrill Asphalt secretary in the company's office here.