

CORPS NEWS

ONE YEAR LATER: REFLECTIONS ON OSO



Photo taken May 16, 2014. Courtesy of Department of Ecology.

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Luke Wigle, Olympic National Park Supervisor & Disaster Response Specialist:

None of us could have imagined we would respond to such a localized and tragic event as the S.R. 530 landslide in Oso last March. The impact it had on our Corps Members and staff will forever be remembered. Crews worked 16+ hour days to make sure first responders had everything they needed out on the incident site. We helped make things run smoothly and efficiently at the different Incident Command Posts and at the drop points in the field. Others worked tirelessly on the slide to drain areas of water to make it easier to search. The memories of the lasting positive impact on communities we served will stay with those who deployed, for years to come.

SR-530 Landslide Response (March 26-April 28, 2014)

- 82 members deployed
- Served more than 18,500 hours
- Collected and distributed 6,350 lbs of donations
- Served 13,700 meals to responders
- Dug 9,400 feet of drainage ditch
- Constructed 3,500 feet of trail for access to slide and for geologic and seismic equipment
- Spread 3,300 feet of gravel at base camps
- Fell 220 trees in slide area to help with search efforts





Digging trenches to dewater the debris field

Ben Kunes, 2013-2014 City of Bellingham Crew Member:

Working on the Oso Landslide response was a significant part of the past year for me. My crew – made up of members from both City of Bellingham crews and led by Liz Anderson – was part of the first round of crews to be deployed. We were assigned to work on facilities, to transform an empty high school into a space that the Incident Command Post could function. This work was hardly glamorous, but it was a testament to the wide array of individual components that make up a complex response effort. Every sign, every ramp had a role to play. Working under the Incident Command structure was a challenge, and sometimes led to miscommunications – some of them comical, others frustrating. But it was a privilege to work alongside a diverse group of people from a broad range of organizations, to help those affected by the disaster.



One of the many signs created during deployment



Moving and spreading gravel all around the base camps

Jackson Owens, 2014 Maury Island Crew Member and 2014-2015 Skagit Spike:

A week after I interviewed for a position on a Maury Island Marine Park crew last March news broke of a devastating slide just north of Seattle. I had never heard of Oso, Washington, and I certainly never imagined responding to the disaster just two weeks later. We arrived at the Arlington Incident Command Post at the crack of dawn on my fifth day as a corps member; I hardly knew my crew, and had no idea what to expect for the next 14 days.

It became clear within minutes of arriving among the response vehicles, supply tents, trailers, and determined but exhausted workers how significant and devastating this disaster was. We met up with the crews we were replacing, to learn our responsibilities and hear other words of wisdom they had to offer. As they showed us the facilities closet and the best technique for cleaning port-a-potties I couldn't help but be inspired by the optimism and strength of our sleep deprived and emotionally and physically drained mentors. They were on their last day of a 14 day deployment, and still showed tremendous motivation and pride for the work. They deserved to go home to their families and friends with a comfortable bed and no alarm clock. It was our turn to take on the 16 hour days and keep things running smoothly.

We went straight to work without any hesitation. It was crunch time. Those 14 days showed us the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, and the community stayed strong throughout. I am constantly inspired and humbled by the memories of my time working the Oso landslide. The WCC had an integral role in the response effort, and to be a part of it was unbelievable. Everyone I worked alongside demonstrated the selfless, hard-working mentality that is the foundation of our program. Never has it been more evident to me how incredibly important our work is.



Decontamination tent

"I am constantly inspired and humbled by the memories of my time working the Oso landslide"
-Jackson Owens

Ishta Tyler, 2014 DNR Urban Forestry Crew Member, 2014-2015 Lake Stevens:

This experience was ultimately the greatest introduction to WCC and what the program is truly about: teamwork, support, and new experiences. I started a 6-month term and had only worked 5 days before we got word that my Lake Stevens crew, supervised by Derek Voelker, was to be deployed to help with the Oso landslide. I was excited, and admittedly, a little nervous for what deployment would actually entail. I knew,

personally, those weeks were going to be an emotional rollercoaster. I sought out any positive moment or happy thread I could find and held on tight. Fortunately, there was an abundance of



Homemade cards helped raise morale among those deployed

compassion among all those involved, that I can only summarize as acts of love. Amidst the chaos, arduous hours, and emotional circumstances I witnessed people from varying entities -firefighters, sawyers, construction workers, National Guard, Green Cross, WCC members, and local volunteers to name a few- come together and support one another through this despairing time. A hundred working parts. One giant team. One shared desire to help.

While the daily tasks we were assigned held their own significance, I realized the most important impact I could have was to simply return the same empathy, kindness, and warmth that had been shown to us in our first few days there. Some of my fondest memories were from the days I was stationed at Drop Point 2, where we served food and gave supplies to workers heading out into the field. The weather was bitter cold, the labor was grueling, and the days were long, but we did anything we could to keep spirits up. One bleak and drizzly afternoon, I had the honor of delivering hot soup to all the flaggers in the field, who accepted so graciously and enthusiastically that they radioed ahead to their fellow flaggers further up the road that "love" was on the way.

We also had the privilege of handing out homemade cards from nearby school districts; a wonderful idea that Rob Crawford and his wife initiated and maintained throughout the remainder of our deployment. We handed one beautifully crafted card to each and every worker who passed through, going so far as to place them in ziplock bags to keep them safe from the mud and rain. I watched as these tough, strong, gruff men and women were reduced to tears and then giggles (literally, gig-

"It was a privilege to work alongside a diverse group of people from a broad range of organizations, to help those affected by the disaster."

-Ben Kunesh

gles) as they read over the brilliant drawings and sweet words of support and gratitude these children had poured into their cards. The Oso firehouse was another bright light in the face of sorrow, always inundated with posters from schools and families wanting to show love and support. Volunteers cooked hot dinners for all the workers returning from the field. Charitable donations were dropped off by the truck loads and service puppies ran around offering a much-needed and greatly appreciated, happy distraction. Here, in the face of devastation, I observed sincere smiles, I heard laughter, and I felt the love.

I recall one of the days I worked out in the field with a few other corps members, duct taped in our raingear, digging drainage ditches to help clear water for the Search & Rescue teams. Something as small as a pink Crayola crayon floating down the trench I was working on broke my heart in to pieces. Right there in the muck and rain I fell apart, tears streaming down my face, fogging up my goggles. Being completely covered in hazardous mud, I was unable to dry my eyes or wipe off my glasses to even see what I was doing anymore. Crying silently to myself, I continued digging, blindly. Looking back now it all sounds somewhat comical, but at the time, I was feeling rather pathetic. When I trudged off the field for lunch, some kind stranger noticed my weepy face and without a word, wrapped me up in warm, loving embrace. Just like that; no questions asked, no explanation needed.



Members always aware of heavy machinery working nearby

This was not the last time I would be shown such unconditional compassion or witness strangers hugging strangers, being there for one another because we were all in this together. In that way we understood, on some level, how emotional the work really was. I have

thought about Oso

often, and have always had difficulty putting into words what I felt and experienced. However, given the chance to share my stories I realize that a few key words continue to resurface: Love, Compassion, Warmth, Gratitude. These were the most important things I took away from my time there. The disaster in Oso was devastating, to say the very least. Still, the experience was so morally fulfilling. I feel honored to have been given the opportunity to help in any small way I could, but above all I feel blessed by the friendships I established. Bonds were formed during those weeks that will never be broken, and memories I will never forget.

"I feel honored to have been given the opportunity to help in any small way I could."

-Ishta Tyler

Sonya Kaufman, 2013-2014 Lake Stevens Crew Member, 2014-2015 Skagit DNR:

Six months into my first year as a crew member with Snohomish County's Surface Water Management restoration crew in Lake Stevens, I finally felt like I had mastered most aspects of my job. I could identify nearly all of our plants in our 22,000 native plant nursery. I could take apart, put together, and even successfully start a brush cutter. I knew the difference between a McLeod, hori-hori, and a Pulaski. My crew had quickly become my closest friends in Washington State. I moved to Washington a week before our crew year started. As one of those east coast transplants, I felt comfortable in my Everett apartment and ready to call this place home. Along with feeling more comfortable came hints of restlessness – getting tired of repetitive restoration work, a little antsy for new projects, new sites, new days without being covered head to toe in bright yellow raingear.

Change came swiftly and horribly. The S.R. 530 slide happened about 30 miles from my Everett home. A newcomer to Snohomish County, I did not have deep connections with the area, or know anyone who lived out there, but I felt for those who did. Even though I had only been here for six months, I had grown attached to the wide, bending rivers of Snohomish County, its low rolling hills, and stunning views of the mountains. Working outdoors with the WCC will do that – I learned the geography of the county through the feel of its dirt and smooth texture of its rivers' rocks.

I was deployed to Oso without my crew. Caleb Dobey's crew had a spot to fill, and I left early to join them. It was intimidating, and exciting, to head out on disaster response alone. The night before I left, I packed up everything I thought I might need. The Arlington Incident Command Post (ICP), located at the old Arlington High School was only a 25-minute drive from my house, and I figured I would return home each night. But I packed up everything I would need to stay over there just in case. That "just in case" turned into eleven days and nights at the ICP; I did not go home once.

Arriving at the ICP was like stepping into another world.. It was fascinating to walk among professionals from over 100 different agencies, dressed in crisp,

*"Arriving at the ICP was like stepping into another world."
-Sonya Kaufman*



Sonya Kaufman working in debris field her during deployment

clean uniforms, and to see the inner workings of incident management that I could never have seen as a part of the public. I was to work on the Facilities crew. Liz Anderson's crew from the City of Bellingham was amazing. They had been there nearly a week by the time I got there, and were starting to feel the exhaustion kick in. They were full of stories, efficient in their polished routines, and I worked hard to seamlessly integrate myself into their team. I was swept up in the intensity and gravity of the slide, and incredibly impressed with the quality of work of our crews. WCC members were the ones who had established new protocols and ways of doing things all over the ICP – in logistics, in supply, and in facilities.



Balancing on I-beams while working in debris field

The ICP was a center of activity, with thousands of emergency workers passing through each day, and we were the backbone. We ensured that the building was clean and sanitary, to prevent the spread of illnesses, and to give people a warm home to return to after long days. We cleaned all of the port-a-potties that adorned the ICP. We spent most of our days on rounds, taking out trash, sweeping floors, and sanitizing banisters, doorknobs, and even light switches. Many emergency workers commented on how clean and welcoming it was, and that this was the first time they had been on response and avoided sickness.

On the side, we were a signs and ramps building business. Before I got there, ramps had been in high demand, but when I arrived they were on the way out – and signs were in. Ben Kunesh, (City of Bellingham crew), and I established an excellent sign-making system. We built signs from old boards of plywood -from the extensive high school theater storage attic upstairs- white paint, spray paint, carefully lettered stencils, and hardware. We set up a sign-making headquarters in the woodshop in the basement of the school and built all manner of signs. The more we made, the more requests we got.

Everyone worked with a high degree of urgency, even though we were so far removed from the slide. Disaster work affects everyone differently, and I reacted well to the stress and urgency of the emergency response environment. The restlessness and boredom I had been feeling about restoration work vanished, and I was in high gear. I woke up to my 4:50am alarm with adrenaline flowing through me. I worked hard all day, for sixteen hours straight, eleven days in a row, always cheerfully. I felt like I could do anything, and I had no desire to be anywhere else. I brought those feelings of motivation home with me from

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"I was swept up in the intensity and gravity of the slide, and incredibly impressed with the quality of work of our crews."

-Sonya Kaufman

SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER DAY HELPING HOMEOWNERS AFTER FLOODING



Hardworking volunteers and team leader Ashley Matelski with mud removed from backyard. Photos courtesy of Ashley Matelski.

*“The homeowner was floored with happiness when she saw us remove all the mud from her backyard.”
-Ashley Matelski*

On February 21, over 220 volunteers gathered in Aberdeen to help homeowners that had been affected by flooding in January. Ashley Matelski (Skagit Fisheries Crew) led a group and had this to say about the volunteers. “I had a wonderful group of volunteers that not only dedicated their time, but also their enthusiasm, creativity and even some of their own tools! Sue, the homeowner was floored with happiness when she saw us remove all the mud from her backyard. We even used some trail work knowledge to build some brick rock walls to help her waterfall and stream flow better, without bringing more sediment down. It was a fun successful day!”



Hardworking volunteers admire a new brick wall to guide the stream.

February 21 Volunteer Day:

- 224 total volunteers
- Mitigation work completed on 36 households
- Mitigation started on 34 households to be completed by crews
- 17.8 tons of flood damaged debris was collected and disposed

Kaufman, cont'd from p.7**A sign to express heartfelt thanks to volunteers**

tions, and it was easy for me to lose my composure, especially at our first all-WCC debrief. Each crew had nightly debriefs, but lead supervisors Jay McMillen and Ernie Farmer wanted to bring all the crews together for a meeting. That day, WCC members were present in the field where human remains were recovered from the mud. The meeting began with words of reassurance from a chaplain working for the incident, and then he asked us to share our experiences. Humbly, solemnly, and sometimes humorously, corps members and supervisors slowly spoke up about what they'd experienced at Oso. It was moving to hear my colleagues' stories, and to understand how affected others had been. After a certain point I could do nothing but cry. I think I wept quietly for most of that meeting, and comforted friends nearby who were doing the same. We ended the debriefing with instructions from Jay to turn around and give someone a hug. Pretty mushy for a regular WCC team, but in these circumstances, it felt necessary.

The Bellingham facilities team left before I did. It was really hard to see them go – they were my support network, my stable coworkers and friends who, in a way, made everything okay. All of a sudden, I went from being the least-experienced to the most-experienced WCC member on Facilities. A crew had arrived from King County, and with my original team gone, I was in charge of training the new group. I know they were overwhelmed at first, but they did an excellent job of following directions, being accommodating, and keeping their senses of humor as they dove headfirst into the crazy world of the ICP.

After I taught them everything I could, I backed off slowly. I

Oso, and while they've worn off over the last year, they still serve as a reminder for the strength that exists within me, and how far I can push myself to find it.

As good as I felt working as a part of the response to Oso, I also felt the intense sadness of the situation. As the days wore on, I found myself more and more susceptible to tears. I was in a state of heightened emotions,

**Supervisor Jay McMillen, clearing area for LiDAR equipment**

"Those five minutes of silence, holding my hard hat in my hand, were some of the toughest minutes of my deployment..."

-Sonya Kaufman

ALUMNI: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

BY: JOHANNA SCHWEISS (FORMERLY JOHANNA OFNER), IP 2010-2012

Experience as a WCC Member:

During my two years of service with the WCC, I served as an Individual Placement with the Department of Ecology's Carbon Smart Initiative. I worked with Ecology's Climate Policy Group, Sustainability Team and Facilities team on a variety of sustainability projects: greenhouse gas inventories, the Washington King Tide Photo Initiative, the LEED for Existing Buildings certification of

Ecology's Lacey Headquarters and Eastern Regional Office, and the Sustainability Team's food bank garden. I feel lucky that I had the opportunity to work with and learn from folks from all across the agency, while enjoying all the perks of being a member of the WCC- like making baskets and acorn muffins in the ethno-botany training.

What She's Doing Now:

A Midwestern gal at heart, I moved back to St. Louis after my time with the WCC, and the experience I gained as an IP definitely helped that transition go smoothly. Shortly after moving, I began a climate action internship with the Missouri Gateway Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council. In that role I completed a greenhouse gas inventory for the City of Wildwood, a St. Louis-area municipality. Following that internship, I was excited to join the USGBC-Missouri Gateway Chapter full time as their Volunteer & Outreach Coordinator. Now, my work includes managing our community projects. We have organized opportunities for our volunteers to speak to community groups about sustainability, paired them up with congregations to create sustainability action plans, and coordinated teams to pursue LEED for Existing Buildings certification for non-profit facilities. I also support our organization's membership, advocacy, and marketing efforts. I use the knowledge and communication skills I developed during my time as an IP every day, and often think of the WCC and Ecology friends I made during my time in Washington.

Advice to Current Members:

To all current members – I hope you enjoy this opportunity! Keep up the good work and continue to make all of us alums proud to have been a part of something special. And enjoy one of those acorn muffins for me.



Johanna Schweiss tabling at the Green Product Expo. Photo courtesy of Johanna Schweiss

"I feel lucky that I had the opportunity to work with and learn from folks all across the agency..."

-Johanna Schweiss

Kaufman, p. 9

wanted them to feel ownership over their work on facilities. I finished our long list of sign-building projects, training others along the way, and then gave them space.

During the next week or so, I spent days working in areas where I hadn't worked before. I spent a day at Drop Point 2, organizing supplies and serving lunch. We were on the edge of the slide, and could hear and see everything that was going on. Not long after I arrived there, a body was

found. Those five minutes of silence, holding my hard hat in my hand, were some of the toughest minutes of my deployment, followed closely by the day I spent working on the pile, digging drainage ditches to make it easier for the excavators to navigate through the mud. I worked in the field on day 9 of my deployment, and I was physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted.

I was different after Oso, and I still am different. It was a perspective-shifter. Most of the immediate effects of working there have worn off, and I'm still understanding the long-term ones. I learned a lot about resilience, strength, and community. I push myself to use that strength whenever I can, not just when called for by an emergency. I was only one out of thousands of people who were affected by the slide, and everyone was affected differently. We all have stories to tell, from the families and friends of the 43 victims of the slide, to the 108 Washington Conservation Corps employees, thousands of emergency responders, and 750,000 residents of Snohomish County. The stories may come out slowly, as we individually process our experiences, but they're there – pause to take a moment to listen to others, as you've listened to mine.



A memorial and symbol of resilience

*“Let us be grateful to people who make us happy, they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom”
-Marcel Proust*

Oso photos courtesy of Sonya Kaufman, Luke Wigle, and Department of Ecology



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Accommodation Requests:

To request ADA accommodation including materials in a format for the visually impaired, call Ecology, 360-407-7248. Persons with impaired hearing may call Washington Relay Service at 711. Persons with speech disability may call TTY at 877-833-6341.

Washington Department of Ecology
PO Box 47600
Olympia, WA 98504-7600
www.ecy.wa.gov/wcc

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WHERE DID ALL THOSE TREES GO?

BY: LAURA SCHLABACH, OUTREACH AND DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR

You might notice some changes around Cispus Learning Center as you drive into campus in a few weeks for training. According to Chase Buffington, Cispus General Manager, Cispus removed trees around the dorms because they had become Hazard Trees: ones that have become a threat to high traffic areas. Staff also noticed large branches starting to fall under weight of heavy snow, which is a risk given the trees' close proximity to Cispus dorms. Some of the root systems were also affecting nearby septic systems. Cispus also removed a large area of trees near the dorms due to laminated root rot, one of the most damaging root diseases among conifers in this area. Laminated root rot is root decay caused by a fungus, which can spread to nearby healthy root systems upon contact. The fungus can remain soil systems for up to 50 years. According to Buffington, Cispus hopes to install a new dorm in the cleared area. On the bright side, make sure and take in the wider views of surrounding mountain peaks now visible from campus!



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IN THE NEXT NEWSLETTER!

*Please send your stories,
photos, and updates for
publishing to Maggie Counihan at
maggie.counihan@ecy.wa.gov*

February Crossword Answers

Across:

5.OPRAHWINFREY 7.LINCOLN 8.GOBLERSKNOB 9.WHISTLE 11.DANIELDAYLEWIS
14.TWOHUNDREDEIGHTYTHREE 15.GROUNDHOGDAY 16.WASHINGTON

Down:

1.NIXON 2.HARRISON 3.JEFFERSON 4.PRESIDENTSDAY 6.PUNXSUTAWNEYPHIL
10.MARMOTAMONAX 12.FDR 13.VEGETARIANS

ABOUT THE WCC

The Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) was established in 1983 as a service program for young adults between the ages of 18-25. The WCC is offered through the Washington Department of Ecology and continues the legacy started by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The WCC has been an AmeriCorps program since 1994. Today, the WCC has around 300 members working on projects in every part of the state. Our partners include Federal, State, Local, and Tribal organizations. For more information please visit our website: www.ecy.wa.gov/wcc.