Docket Number
COE-2012-0016

More slides.
More reasons not
to have coal trains
go through this
area.

Sincerely,

JoAnne Felton
3049 NE 94th St
Seattle WA 98115

Friday
Dec 21, 2012

Around the Northwest

Mukilteo

Mudslides plague railroad tracks

Mudslides have been hitting the railroad tracks along Puget Sound between Mukilteo and Everett almost faster than Burlington Northern Santa Fe can clean them up.

Spokesman Gus Melonas said after three slides Wednesday night, there were six more Thursday morning. The slides were as big as 6 feet deep and 30 feet wide and carried 100-foot trees.

The railroad has equipment ready to clear the slides because the section of track was hit dozens of times last year and is vulnerable after recent heavy rains.

Melonas said freight trains were rolling again, but Sound Transit's Northline Sounder and Amtrak trains must wait 48 hours for safety. Rail passengers are bused during the moratorium.

A mudslide south of Everett on Monday hit a freight train and derailed seven cars.

Slide parks Sounder again

BUT NORTHLINE COMMUTERS KEEP FAITH DESPITE RECORD CANCELLATIONS

PHOTOS BY ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Sounder train service northbound from Seattle was suspended again because of a mudslide Thursday afternoon. This Amtrak maintenance yard south of the King Street Station is where the trains are serviced and stored.

BY ALEXA VAUGHN
Seattle Times staff reporter

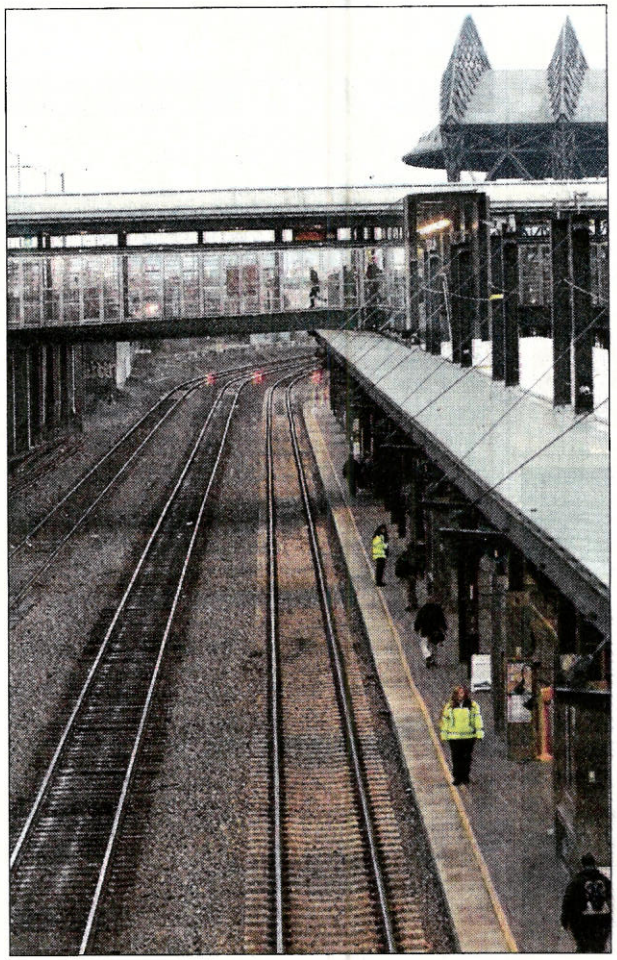
Despite a record number of Northline Sounder cancellations caused by mudslides this rainy season, Sound Transit passengers commuting between Seattle and Everett were excited to finally board their trains again Thursday morning.

A break in the relentless rain that had helped trigger at least 73 mudslides since Thanksgiving — including one that derailed a freight train — had many thinking they wouldn't have to wait for standing-room-only buses with unpredictable schedules as often as they did last month.

Sound Transit hadn't used the tracks between Seattle and Everett since Dec. 18 and the Northline Sounder had been canceled several times in late November as well. The slides cut off Amtrak service north of Seattle, too.

But the resumption of passenger service was short-lived. At 1:15 p.m. a new mudslide south of Mukilteo stopped passenger service on the tracks once again. The Seattle-Everett corridor won't be open to passenger rail service for Sound Transit or Amtrak until at least Saturday afternoon, according to BNSF Railway, which owns and is responsible for maintaining the tracks.

So, Thursday afternoon, hundreds of commuters crowded near Fourth Avenue South and South Jackson Street in Seattle to pile onto buses to Edmonds, Mukilteo and Everett.



Sound Transit service reps in green coats were on the platform to alert riders that no northbound trains would arrive on these tracks.

ON THE WEB
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seattletimes.com/photography

"To be honest, taking the bus is horrific," said David Oakes, 32, who was waiting for a bus back to Everett around 4:30 p.m. "If you're not here early, you're lucky if you can even get on. A lot of times it's standing-room-only when I get here."

As of Thursday, the Sounder Northline route had experienced a record 122 train cancellations for 2012-2013, according to Sound Transit spokeswoman Kimberly Reason. The last record for cancellations was 70 during 2010-2011.

The reports of mudslides and a necessary habit of constantly checking for Northline service updates hasn't soured Oakes' love for commuting on the train at all, he said. Not having a half-hour commute turn into a two-hour commute or worse — a dangerously icy commute, he says — is enough to sell him on the route. The views from the train and extra breathing room are just a bonus.

Oakes didn't seem fazed by the recent spike in mudslides. Neither did Dennis Matthews, 61, of Edmonds.

"We are willing to accept there's a

See > **NORTHLINE, B4**

< Northline | FROM B1

SOUNDER TRAINS

Mudslides on route have canceled record number of trains

chance of a mudslide," Matthews said, as he waited to board a packed bus.

Mudslides have been particularly prevalent between Everett and Mukilteo, according to BNSF Railway. Last month was one of the wettest Decembers in the area on record, which oversaturated cliffs that rise as high as 200 feet next to the tracks, said BNSF spokesman Gus Melonas.

A 75-foot-wide mudslide derailed seven cars of a Burlington Northern Santa Fe freight train south of Everett on Dec. 17. The surface slide came from an oversaturated 100-foot cliff that geotechnical engineers had been scheduled to check right after the 66-car train passed, Melonas said. The derailment spilled cleaning products, lemon juice and solvents.

Millions of dollars have been spent just to clean up debris, he said. In the past week, BNSF crews worked to pull out trees and stumps that had been triggering some slides because they weighed too much on the edge of some of those cliffs, Melonas said.

BNSF is prepared to spend millions more on longer-term solutions that have worked on other parts of the Northline route. A $16 million federal grant awarded to the state in 2011 will also help fund future mudslide- reduction work, according to the Washington State Department of Transportation. Geotechnical studies BNSF is commissioning will be used to prioritize what mudslide reduction strategies will work best.

One could be improving drainage on the cliffs above the tracks between Everett and Mukilteo. Melonas says many of the mudslides may have been caused by possible drainage problems coming from private residences and businesses near the cliffs.

When mudslides were a bigger problem closer to Seattle in the late '90s, installing drainage systems near Golden Gardens and Carkeek Park reduced mudslides in the area, he said.

Sound Transit depends on warnings and railway moratoriums from BNSF to make decisions about whether to run trains, Reason said.

"We know they're working very, very hard to reduce mudslides, but we also understand it's an extremely expensive proposition to stabilize the entire coastline," Reason said. "It's a very complex geotechnical problem, and it's frustrating for everybody."

Despite mudslides canceling several Northline trains, which are already carrying fewer passengers than Sounder proponents initially predicted — 1,300 instead of 2,400 weekday boardings on average — Reason said Sound Transit has a lot of faith that more residents near Edmonds, Mukilteo and Everett will appreciate the commuter train in the future. Since October 2011, ridership has steadily increased from an average 978 passengers, Sound Transit says.

"We understand the topography is not ideal, even though it may be the most beautiful commuter route in the country," Reason said. "But the North County community worked really hard to get commuter rail to their cities. The Sounder riders we have are loyal."

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