Landslide buries portion of Canyon Road; more storms possible
By ROSS COURTNEY
Yakima Herald-Republic

Thunderstorms that drenched one spot and left others bone dry. Flash-flood landslides that closed three state highways in less than a week. Lightning every night in places.

If the weather seems weird this summer, that’s because it is — sort of.

Everyone from meteorologists to farmers to river guides to emergency officials are calling this month’s menacing and erratic weather unusual, but far from unheard of.

"We’d been looking forward to getting past this long, cool spring and into the summer time, and now we get to the summer time and we get thunderstorms," said Steve Joyce, part owner of Red’s Fly Shoppe at Canyon River Ranch Lodge in the Yakima River Canyon. "I would say working with Mother Nature, you kind of expect this. This year is now bordering on excessive."

Joyce should know. His business sits about five miles down river from two landslides that buried sections of State Route 821 under rock, mud and debris after thunderstorms dumped an inch of rain in about an hour Tuesday evening.

State transportation officials estimate seven miles of road will remain closed until late afternoon today as about nine workers with backhoes, excavators and dump trucks labor to clear it. Wednesday morning, crews cleared a single lane for emergency vehicles only.

The slides occurred in the same area where a massive 1998 landslide buried the highway, also known as Canyon Road, for two weeks and carried debris all the way to the Yakima River, said Terry Kukes, a state Department of Transportation superintendent overseeing the cleanup.

Officials have reported no injuries or property damage, and no businesses or homes are stranded, said Mike Westbay, a spokesman for the Transportation Department. But Joyce and his employees must detour the slide via Interstate 82 in order to meet clients on the upriver side of the canyon and keep their peak season running as smoothly as possible.

"It’s just one of those things we deal with," Joyce said.

Also Tuesday night, the same storm caused flooding along the eastbound lanes of I-82 east of Manastash Ridge, Westbay said. Crews have closed the shoulder with reflective barrels after pooling water caused erosion to the shoulder. Workers are using landslide debris from the canyon to repair the interstate’s shoulder, Westbay said.

The canyon landslide was the third in four days to close a state highway.
On Wednesday morning workers were able to reopen State Route 263 south of Kahlotus, where a heavy downpour Sunday night washed mud, rock and debris over the road.

A day earlier, thunderstorms triggered flash floods that closed State Route 14 in eastern Klickitat County along the Columbia River for two days. It stranded several drivers, buried a section of railroad track and turned back a passenger train.

A flash flood Saturday cut off a Forest Service road near Cle Elum, according to a news release from the National Forest Service. Folks visiting the area for recreation cleared it themselves with shovels.

The floods have been caused by localized thunderstorms, which aren’t by themselves unusual for South Central Washington this time of year, according to metrologists and others. What’s unusual is that the storms have lasted this long.

"Thunderstorms and lighting on regular basis, in my view, is unusual," said Jim Hall, Yakima County’s emergency management coordinator. Hall has been keeping tabs on hazardous weather, flood watches and storm warnings for 10 years at his current post. He previously served 27 years as a Yakima County Sheriff’s deputy.

"It’s different this year for some reason," he said.

That reason, at least this week, is a low-pressure system that has been camping off the coast of Northern California and spinning unstable weather our way since the weekend. It will most likely stick around until Friday morning, as will a flash flood warning for the Yakima and Kittitas valleys, said Mary Wister, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Pendleton, Ore.

Of all the weather patterns she has watched during her 20-year Northwest career, Wister said this is probably one of the most unusual.

However, one element of our weather is common. Summer thunderstorms, especially the slow-moving ones seen in the Valley this week, are known for soaking one area while leaving others just a few miles away untouched, Wister said.

On Sunday, when the slide buried SR-14 in Klickitat County, forecasters at the weather service struggled to find recordings of rain in the area. Stations just across the Columbia River came up dry. Forecasters learned about the washouts from responding firefighters and law enforcement personnel.

"Unless you were right there at the storm, we will never know if it will actually pan out," Wister said.

Meanwhile, state climatologists, charged with tracking regional weather data, chalked this July up to only mildly unusual.

The stormy weather "is not unprecedented and this is definitely the time of year we would see it more," said Karin Bumbaco, assistant state climatologist in the Office of the Washington State Climatologist.

In 2010, Yakima, Lincoln and Chelan counties reported property damage and flash floods due to heavy rainstorms for three days in late July, she said. One report in Bumbaco’s records described floodwaters dislodging manhole covers in downtown Wenatchee. Bumbaco also found notes from 2006 of hail and flooding for the first two weeks of July in the Yakima Valley.
"It’s just so easy to forget the variability that can occur in weather," she said.

• Ross Courtney can be reached at 509-930-8798 or rcourtney@yakimaherald.com.

Crews work to reopen State Route 821 the morning of July 18, 2012 after a landslide buried portions of the highway following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012. (GORDON KING/Yakima Herald-Republic)

Crews work to reopen State Route 821 the morning of July 18, 2012 after a landslide buried portions of the highway following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012.

Crews work to reopen State Route 821 the morning of July 18, 2012 after a landslide buried portions of the highway following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012.
Crews work to reopen State Route 821 the morning of July 18, 2012 after a landslide buried portions of the highway following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012.

Rocks litter State Route 821 five miles south of Ellensburg as crews work to reopen the highway the morning of July 18, 2012 after a landslide buried portions of the highway following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012. One lane of the road was expected to reopen by late the morning of July 18, according to a Washington State Department of Transportation official.

GORDON KING / Yakima Herald-Republic
Workers clear a mudslide from Canyon Road on Wednesday, July 18, 2012.
A front-end loader works July 18, 2012 to break through one of the landslides which buried a portion of State Route 821 following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012. Two separate landslides blocked the highway. (GORDON KING/Yakima Herald-Republic)

Crews work to reopen State Route 821 the morning of July 18, 2012 after a landslide buried portions of the highway following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012.
Crews work to reopen State Route 821 the morning of July 18, 2012 after a landslide buried portions of the highway following a rainstorm the evening of July 17, 2012.