

Verdict reached in 2003 mudslide deaths

Dug Begley, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 10-12-10

A San Bernardino County jury has found Caltrans partially responsible for a deadly 2003 mudslide that killed 14 people at a Waterman Canyon area church camp.

Last week, jurors found the state's design of Highway 18 contributed to the Christmas Day mudslide and flooding, which swept five adults and nine children away as they visited St. Sophia Camp, near Crestline. Two others were killed in a separate incident at a KOA campground in Devore, also caused by torrential rains following a disastrous wildfire season in the San Bernardino Mountains.

Caltrans spokesman Jason Goldman said the state was held 31 percent responsible for the deaths at St. Sophia. He declined further comment, noting the case is ongoing.

Since the accident, Highway 18 has been redesigned slightly. Transportation officials "did some things to the slopes below the highway," said the attorney for St. Sophia Greek Foundation and St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church, David Ringwood. Those fixes came up earlier in the trial, Ringwood said.

St. Sophia, which counter-sued Caltrans after the relatives of victims filed a claim against the church, settled its cases for \$13 million in 2008. Jurors last week said it bore 69 percent of the blame for the deaths.

Those swept away at the church camp were celebrating Christmas with the church's on-site caretaker and his family.

Jurors are weighing how much Caltrans should pay, Ringwood said. The church argues the state is responsible for around \$3.9 million, based on how much the church paid people for lost wages and other factors. Caltrans estimates the award should be around \$2.2 million, Ringwood said.

Both sides are expected to wrap up their arguments today, Ringwood said.

Heavy rains sent water gushing through mountain canyons in December 2003. Earlier that year two severe wildfires charred grasses and trees and the storms slammed logs and boulders into buildings at the church camp.

"I remember going up there, the first time I saw it, my jaw dropped open," said Wayne McClean, an attorney who represented victim's families in their suit against the church.

One victim was found 15 miles away, four months after the flood.

Family members have stayed silent about the incident, McClean said.

"These families were just destroyed," he said.

The accident also changed how many areas treat mudslides, McClean added.

"You hear about it more now after fires and when we have heavy rains," he said. "I think this tragedy made it possible to have a constant reminder every time we have the potential for debris flow."