

Seeing and hearing the landslide up close

A forgotten clipboard may have saved a life

Thadeus Greenson, Eureka Times-Standard, 4-1-11

Plainly, Nathan Stancliff has never liked the route.

Though he's driven his Delreka Distributing truck from Eureka to Garberville once a week for several months to deliver to Southern Humboldt grocery stores, he's always done so a bit nervously.

"I've told everyone that I don't like this route because I feel there's going to be a landslide," Stancliff said Thursday -- a day after a massive slide covered all four lanes of U.S. Highway 101 with tons of mud, rocks and debris. "I'm always worried I'm going to end up in a situation where there's going to be a landslide coming down and a cliff on the other side. Imagine that."

On Wednesday, Stancliff didn't have to imagine. He was there to see, hear and feel what he described as "this huge green blob" descend from the mountain to eat the highway. According to Caltrans, what Stancliff saw was a 600-foot-wide piece of earth stretching 1,500 feet up the hillside move at once, descending on the roadway and buckling it 50 feet in both directions.

And if it weren't for an absent-minded moment, Stancliff said, he and his truck might also have been right in the middle of it.

When preparing his truck to head south, Stancliff said, he left his clipboard on the ground of the loading parking lot. He had to turn back to get it, putting him a couple of minutes behind schedule -- a couple of minutes that may have saved his life.

Not thinking much of it, Stancliff said, he proceeded on his route, listening to music and enjoying the day.

"Everything was pretty calm -- kind of eerie calm," he said.

Near Phillipsville, Stancliff said, he rolled down his window. A few minutes later, he noticed a growing noise in the distance that began drowning out the music playing in his cab as he came around a sweeping corner.

"You could just hear this crunching -- just crack, crunch, snap, crack," he said. "Then it didn't take long to realize what the snapping and cracking was -- I saw this tree that is upright sliding down right onto the road in this huge green blob. When I first saw it, the top was moving so quick it was like when you take butter and put it on a hot pan and it just goes bloop. ... And you could feel it when it hit.

"Needless to say," Stancliff continued, "I was in complete shock. It was dumbfounding. I don't even have the words for it."

In the moment when he was downshifting his truck, slowing down while approaching the massive slide, Stancliff said he felt oddly calm. His life didn't flash before his eyes. There was no panic.

"When it was so intense there for a minute, I felt kind of at ease and pictured my daughter smiling," Stancliff said, referring to Carissa Ann, his 4-year-old.

On Thursday, Stancliff said, he's just grateful to be around to tell his story -- grateful that he absent-mindedly left his clipboard on the ground while closing up his truck's tailgate.

"Those couple of minutes were crucial to my being here today," he said. "It's pretty heavy. It really makes you appreciate life when something like this happens."