

Avalanche clogs Provo Canyon

By PAT CHRISTIAN

The Daily Herald

PROVO CANYON — First came the avalanche's cloud, then the heavy snowslide that tore out hundreds of feet of metal and wooden guardrail.

The giant avalanche, triggered between noon and 12:30

p.m. by explosives thrown from a helicopter near the top of Sundance's Arrowhead lift, roared down Slide Canyon. The slide blocked all lanes of U.S. 189 in Provo Canyon Sunday afternoon.

Only the lower, old section highway was left passable. But officials kept the canyon road

closed for the night except to allow skiers to leave Sundance between 4 and 6 p.m.

The canyon closure led Sundance Film Festival officials to cancel two films, "Niagara, Niagara," scheduled for 4:30 p.m., and "Hav Plenty," set for 8 p.m. at Sundance.

"At least we know no one is trapped in there," said Harry Bateman, standing near the foot of the slide and dwarfed by its massive depth, which appeared to be 10 to 15 feet at the edges and much deeper in the center.

Bateman, Utah Department of Transportation supervisor, said traffic had been halted as

his crews in a helicopter used explosives to trigger the avalanche above Slide Canyon, nearly a mile northeast of Bridal Veil Falls.

He said he was sitting in a pickup truck near the foot of the slide to make sure no vehicle got caught in the slide.

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UDOT crews, using heavy equipment, began clearing the slide and worked through the night.

Bateman said the canyon may open this morning.

But Jerry Warren, Sundance's director of skiing, said he had been told the canyon could be cleared by midnight.

Heavy ski day

Today — a holiday — is usually a big day at Sundance.

In fact, Warren said, "Last year it was one of the better days of the season so we are expecting a good day."

Warren and others at Sundance had seen the avalanche from the summit ridge at Arrowhead ski lift.

"It broke loose, and it looked as if the entire snow mass was moving at first, then gained speed," he said.

"Then there was this billowing effect with the dust cloud and it was just roaring and

roaring."

Warren said that near the bottom of Slide Canyon, near the road, the avalanche had slowed with all the weight and took another three or four minutes to creep across the road.

"It's a little disappointing," said an Orem woman, Bonnie (who gave only her first name). She was stopped by a police roadblock at the mouth of Provo Canyon in Orem.

She said she had tickets to the Sundance Film Festival showing of "Niagara, Niagara."

A film festival representative said two films were canceled by the avalanche and would be rescheduled. She said ticket holders should contact Sundance to find out exactly when.

Triggering slides

Bateman said crews in the helicopter had dropped nearly 75 separate explosives in a number of side canyons where UDOT officials felt a natural avalanche potential existed. Only in Slide Canyon was an avalanche actually triggered.

While the old road was not blocked and was used to evacuate Sundance Skiers, UDOT crews considered it unsafe for other traffic.

Bateman said the helicopter crew had noticed a massive snow buildup in the basin that seasonally cascades over Bridal Veil Falls.

That threat was somewhat reduced by cooler late afternoon temperatures.

Recent heavy snow in the higher slopes with the warmer weather Sunday was a recipe for avalanches, and the explosives are a way to bring them down with a knowledge that no drivers are in danger, Bateman said.

"There were avalanches on the 15th and 16th (of January) in Slide Canyon," said Bateman, explaining those slides were naturally triggered but didn't have enough snow to reach the highway.

On the same two days, naturally triggered avalanches came out of Lost Creek Canyon but also failed to reach the road.



JASON OLSON/The Daily Herald

In too deep: Craig Haskell of the Utah Department of Transportation walks along U.S. Highway 189 in Provo Canyon Sunday as crews from the other side clear **snow** from an **avalanche** that closed the canyon for most of the day.