

Massive slides left snowmobilers little chance

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From Wednesday's Globe and Mail — The avalanches that swept down on 11 snowmobilers in an alpine bowl near Fernie, B.C., on Sunday would have been impossible to outrun.

Avalanche experts estimate the wall of snow came at the group at a speed of 150 kilometres an hour or more, leaving at least 10,000 tonnes of snow piled at the bottom nearly four metres deep.

“In large avalanches, having a rescue beacon is not good enough,” said Ilya Storm of the Canadian Avalanche Centre. It is more critical to have the skills to recognize and avoid avalanche terrain.

The slides killed eight of the 11 men, and the rescue was hampered because some of the group had apparently set their rescue beacons to receive, rather than transmit, in order to use their equipment to try to locate the others, before being buried themselves in a subsequent slide.

The conditions that led to the series of avalanches in the Harvey Valley now extend right across southern British Columbia from the coast to the Rockies.

“This is a precursor for other areas. Conditions throughout large parts of B.C. will deteriorate in the next few days and the avalanche danger will increase,” Mr. Storm said.

The avalanche centre has posted unusually broad warnings across the southern half of the province, cautioning against backcountry travel on all but the safest low-angle slopes and trails. Critical conditions have been created by a cold snap in mid-December, followed by heavy snowstorms and strong winds. In the Fernie region alone, the centre logged 11 avalanche reports on Monday.

The avalanche that caught the snowmobilers in the Harvey Valley was rated 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5 – large enough to destroy a wood-frame house.

Around the ridge of the bowl, nearly half a metre of dry snow had built up with recent winds. That fresh snow formed a slab sitting atop a weak layer of loose, old snow. Those layers in turn sat on a crust of ice – an unstable foundation for heavy slabs of snow.

“Conditions in that area are hair-trigger. Professionals are tiptoeing around in the area to keep themselves safe,” Mr. Storm said.

Forecasters at the avalanche centre are especially concerned that the temptation to get out into the backcountry now, just before the Christmas holidays end, will lead to poor judgment.

The centre's warnings across the different regions are written with that in mind.

“This is not a snowpack to mess with,” states the South Columbia entry.

“If your holiday plans involve ripping it up in the backcountry, seriously consider making new plans,” the South Rockies bulletin reads.

From the South Coast report: “It's a good time to enjoy the new snow in-bounds at a ski area. ... Seriously.”

Mr. Storm said the tone of the bulletins recognizes this week's fresh snow is dangerously inviting. “People have new toys they want to go out and play with, and the sledding hasn't been particularly good until now. So we do have pent-up demand and people are itching to go out and do what they love,” he said.

“But please ... match the trip for the conditions and that means right now ... staying on very low-angled, simple terrain that's safe.”

Mr. Storm, like many of the forecasters working at the avalanche centre's Revelstoke headquarters, is also itching to get into the backcountry.

“I'm frustrated too. I have to stay really disciplined when I go out into the mountains. That's just what it is right now. ... You have to be less ambitious if you want to come home.”

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