

Buried men wore satellite distress transmitters

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The young men buried in two avalanches while snowmobiling in British Columbia's Interior sent out satellite distress signals, authorities revealed yesterday as rescuers began the grim task of recovering bodies.

RCMP Corporal Andy Veltmeyer told reporters that the men wore devices that transmitted their location via satellite to an emergency-response centre in Texas, which then made contact with local rescue units.

Although details remain unclear, experts say the men were likely using the SPOT satellite messenger, a handheld device that has a 911 button that dispatches emergency crews to a GPS location.

The drawback with this device is it can be hours before rescuers arrive, said Mary Clayton, spokeswoman at the Canadian Avalanche Association.

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RCMP on the six confirmed dead

The bodies of six people have been dug out from underneath an avalanche in Fernie, B.C. Two others are still missing.

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Instead, people in avalanche areas are advised to wear special safety radio beacons that rescuers can home in on.

The avalanche beacon, with a frequency of 457 kilohertz, is considered "basic safety gear" for skiers and snowmobilers in the backcountry, Ms. Clayton said.

The units, which range in price from \$275 to \$550, strap onto a person's chest and transmit an electronic signal. If someone is trapped, the rest of the party switches their devices to search or receive so they can home in on the buried signal. They use probe poles to gauge how far down the trapped person is, and then it becomes a race against time as rescuers try to shovel away the heavy snow.

It is not clear if the young men were carrying this device as well.

"They are not proscribed by law, but anyone who travels in backcountry terrain, whether they're a snowshoer or a backcountry skier or a snowmobiler, should be wearing them," said Jonathan Wong, product manager at Mountain Equipment Co-op.

"You can't use [the satellite device] to replace the other. You must carry an avalanche beacon."

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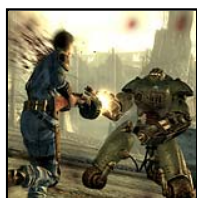
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