



Bodies found in three avalanches

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Rescue crews on Monday recovered the bodies of three men who died after being caught in a trio of separate avalanches in B.C.'s southern interior over the weekend.

Searchers found Leigh Barnier's body Monday afternoon in a slide area of Kelowna's Big White Ski Resort, while rescuers in Midway and Grand Forks recovered the bodies of two snowmobilers trapped in a pair of separate avalanches in that region.

"Three tragedies in less than two days," Midway RCMP Const. Jonathan Spooner said. "It's extremely dangerous out there now."

Kelowna RCMP confirmed Tuesday that the body found at Big White was that of missing 21-year-old Australian snowboarder Leigh Barnier.

Police and a search crew of about 20 people scoured the area around the ski resort for Barnier, who was reported missing after snow crashed down on the Parachute Bowl run, just below a cliff at the top of the mountain at about 11:30 a.m. Sunday.

Barnier, who is from Sydney, Australia, began working at the resort at the start of this season for a private contractor that does housekeeping for the chalets.

Members of Australia's North Narrabeen Surf Lifesaving Club in Sydney, where Barnier had previously worked, were devastated to hear he was

reported missing, said spokesman Sean O'Connell.

According to O'Connell, club president Michael McDermott described Barnier as "one of the nicest blokes imaginable."

Police said he was last seen around 10:30 a.m. Sunday on a hill with some friends. He told them he was going to do "one more run."

That was one hour before the slide.

Two others — a 21-year-old skier and a 12-year-old boy — were half-buried by the snow but pulled out moments after the slide. The avalanche covered 1.6 hectares of the 22.6-hectare bowl.

Snow was up to eight metres deep in some areas, with the force of the avalanche snapping trees and stripping the hill to bare rocks in some parts.

Search and rescue teams used snowmobiles on Monday afternoon to expand the search, while a helicopter with thermal imaging patrolled the skies and ski patrollers scoured the mountain.

The RCMP helicopter was not available for the Big White search because it was being used at the scene of the Midway avalanche, which had trapped 44-year-old experienced snowmobiler Eric Hofman, of Penticton.

Cpl. Kim Hall said Hofman's death has "been pretty tough" on his family.

Spooner said Hofman had gone into the area with two experienced friends Sunday when the avalanche occurred on Mount Arthurs near Christian Valley. The other two tried to find him, but he was not wearing a locator beacon and they had to call in search crews.

"The avalanche came toward them and they tried to get out of the way," Spooner said. "It was too late for us in the day and too dangerous for a rescue attempt."

Hofman was found Monday afternoon with the help of an avalanche dog. Spooner said it was believed he was alive when he was found but he was pronounced dead in Grand Forks Hospital.

Meanwhile, a second snowmobiler was pulled from another avalanche north of Grand Forks, Spooner said.

David Nanook Brousseau, 59, of Grand Forks, was snowmobiling with five friends when an avalanche struck, burying him, in the Wilderness Creek area.

His friends were able to find him and take him to hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

So far this season, there have been nine avalanche fatalities across Canada, six in B.C. —including one on New Year's Day in an out-of-bounds area at Whistler and two snowmobilers near 100 Mile House — and three in Alberta.

The Alberta deaths include a 19-year-old who was caught in an avalanche at Mount St. Piran, northwest of Lake Louise on Monday afternoon.

The teen, who is from Quebec, was climbing the east face of the mountain with another man when the avalanche struck, Lake Louise RCMP said in a news release.

The teen was buried, but his companion stayed on top of the snow by clinging to a tree.

The companion dug out his friend, then called for help on his cellphone. A Parks Canada helicopter took the two to Lake Louise. The teen was rushed to Mineral Springs Hospital, where he died from his injuries.

Canadian Avalanche Centre forecaster Greg Johnson said in a statement that the weekend's storm destabilized the snowpack and a cycle of avalanches may be continuing in the region.

He said avalanches that result from triggering deep snowpack layers tend to be large and dangerous.

"We feel that this 'deep slab instability' will persist in the snowpack well into the future, maintaining significant avalanche risk for the next few weeks or even months," Johnson said.

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