

'Each and every one of us know them'

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ROBERT MATAS AND DAWN WALTON
FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
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VANCOUVER AND SPARWOOD, B.C. — The closely knit town of Sparwood began the process of grieving last night as searchers returned from snowy backcountry mountains in southeastern British Columbia with the bodies of seven snowmobilers caught in an avalanche.

Eleven men, all members of the Sparwood Snowmobiling Club, had gone to a popular sledding area about 70 kilometres away on Sunday. Only three returned alive. A group of around 50 searchers and diggers had retrieved all but one of bodies before suspending their efforts late yesterday.

All the snowmobilers were experienced in backcountry sledding, as enthusiasts call the sport, and equipped with survival gear, friends and neighbours said. The men, in their mid- to late 20s, had grown up together in the mining town about 300 kilometres southwest of Calgary. They went to school together and some were related to each other. Most also worked together at the mines. Eight were married; two had become fathers in the past six months; one was married last June.

Sparwood Mayor David Wilks said the deaths will have a devastating impact on the town of 4,000 people. "Everybody knows everybody here," he said.

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One man still missing

CTV Newsnet: The search for the last man missing after two avalanches will resume Tuesday morning, ahead of another storm expected in the area

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RCMP on avalanche deaths

The bodies of several snowmobilers have been dug out from underneath an avalanche in Fernie, B.C.



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Several of the men were second- and third-generation coal miners in Sparwood. Mr. Wilks said he anticipates the impact on the town will be like that of a mining disaster years ago. Three men survived: Jeff Adams, Jeremy Rusnak and Jordan Drake. The eight who were trapped in the snow were Warren Rothel, Thomas Talarico, Kane Rusnak, Danny Bjarnason, Leonard Stier and his son Michael Stier, Kurt Kabel and Blaine Wilson.

Hundreds of people attended a vigil last night. Carrying candles as the snow softly fell, they gathered by Titan, a tourist attraction dubbed the biggest truck in the world, to hear the mayor's heartbreaking words.

"These 11 young men all from Sparwood touched each and every one of us," Mr. Wilks said. "Each and every one of us know them. They were all good guys. They were out doing what they liked to do. They loved snowmobiling. They know and were very good at what they did."

Avalanches on average kill 16 people every year in Canada. Most fatal avalanches are triggered by backcountry adventurers, according to statistics compiled by the Canadian Avalanche Centre. Once the snow begins to move at speeds of up to 195 kilometres an hour, there is nothing anyone can do to stop it.

The avalanche centre had rated the danger on Sunday as considerable. Karl Klassen, a public avalanche forecaster, said "considerable" means the forecasters warned of a potential danger, advised caution but did not expect to see widespread, large avalanche events.

But then a layer of about 20 centimetres of heavy moist snow fell on an unstable, shallow snowpack as temperatures increased – and much more rapidly than expected. Mr. Klassen speculated that winds blew snow around, creating crusty slabs overhanging the mountains.

"The warming was unexpected," he said. "We knew weather was going to change, that wind and snow was coming. We did not expect it to warm that much that quickly."

A considerable threat of an avalanche is about 3 on a scale of 5. Travel in avalanche terrain is not recommended when the risk is rated as high. Widespread avalanches are certain when the rating is extreme.

Most fatalities happened when the danger rating is considerable, Mr. Klassen said. "When the danger is rated as high or extreme, everyone knows it's bad," he said. But when

the danger is only “considerable,” many people become overconfident. “They make a decision that ends up having bad consequences for them,” he said.

The danger rating was “considerable” at 4 p.m. Sunday when the forecasters went home. They did not realize that avalanches two hours earlier had buried 11 men. Mr. Klassen said he was notified at 7 p.m.

Mr. Wilks suggested the avalanche that took the lives of the Sparwood men could have been sparked by something as simple as the revving of one of their snowmobile engines. Or it could have been an echo when one of the snowmobilers became stuck and yelled back to the guys for help.

“It could have been that simple,” the mayor said. “It doesn’t take much but you never know.”

RCMP Corporal Chris Faulkner told reporters that six bodies were recovered just after 1 p.m. yesterday. Another was found a few hours later. The search for the remaining body was to continue as long as daylight permitted. Then a decision on their next move will be made, he said.

The searchers found the bodies nearly 24 hours after the avalanches were first reported to an emergency call centre at 2:18 p.m. Sunday.

The search began earlier with a helicopter dropping explosions in the avalanche zone to eliminate instabilities on the slopes.

After reducing risk of further avalanches, search-and-rescue volunteers who had come from around the province, accompanied by two specially training police dogs and their handlers, headed into the snowy mountainside to scour for any sign of life.

The bodies were brought out of the wilderness by helicopter.

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