

Search resumes for buried B.C. snowmobilers

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FERNIE, B.C. — Rescuers in the British Columbia Interior were working through “extreme” avalanche conditions Monday in an effort to resume their search for eight snowmobilers buried by two deadly slides Sunday afternoon.

A search-and-rescue helicopter sent up early Monday bombed the area of the slide, a popular backcountry area about 40 kilometres south of Fernie, to bring down avalanches and make the area safe for searchers, said RCMP Staff Sgt. Lorne Craig.

The sound of the bombs echoed through Fernie on Monday morning, reverberating against the grey skies and snowy peaks surrounding the town.

By mid-morning, the team had cleared the area about halfway to the site of the slide, and about 12 to 15 searchers were heading to the region on “snowcat” machines, said Sgt. Craig. Two specially trained avalanche search-and-rescue dogs were at the ready to be flown in by helicopter.



Staff Sgt. Lorne Craig, with Fernie, B.C. RCMP speaks to the media about eight missing snowmobilers Monday. (*Jeff McIntosh/The Canadian Press*)

Videos

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Search resumes for missing snowmobilers

More than 15 avalanche technicians are being transported by helicopter to the scene

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Eight B.C. snowmobilers trapped in avalanche

There are an unknown number of fatalities in connection with an slide that occurred near Fernie, B.C. Sunday night, according to the RCMP

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Rescuers were proceeding with caution because the risk of another slide remained high and conditions were difficult.

“I’ve been told they’re extreme,” Sgt. Craig said.

Eleven men were involved in the two slides. Three who were able to dig themselves out made the wrenching decision Sunday to save themselves and leave their companions buried in the snow.

While there was still a chance someone might be found alive, authorities said they were braced for the worst.

Sgt. Craig said he couldn’t confirm reports of some fatalities. “However, chances of survival at this point, if they were buried, are not very good.”

David Wilks, mayor of nearby Sparwood, said all 11 men were from his town and in their 20s. All knew each other and some were related to one another, he said.

“We’re gonna hope for a miracle here, but experience tells me that time is not on their side,” Mr. Wilks said.

Two groups of snowmobilers were out in the backcountry area when one group of seven was buried by an avalanche.

A second group of four snowmobilers was buried by a second avalanche when they rushed to the scene in response to the first group’s cries for help.

Mr. Wilks, who spoke to one of the survivors, said he was told “they were buried twice and were fortunate enough to be able to dig themselves out after about 20 minutes

after the second avalanche hit.

"My understanding from speaking to [one of the survivors] is that they were at the base of the hill, they had done some snowmobiling in the area. They weren't sledding at the time. They were just sitting at the bottom of the hill. It appears a cornice let loose — an overhang on the top of the mountain — and buried them."

The three who dug themselves out tried to come to the aid of the others, but soon made the wrenching decision to get out of the area.

"They're very distraught that they weren't able to stay and try and find or help their buddies, but . . . one of them was injured and they felt there was an imminent risk of another avalanche coming down," he said. "They had lost their gloves, they had lost everything so they were starting to dig by hand."

Two of the survivors were treated and released. Mr. Wilks said the third was still in hospital with an injury to his arm or shoulder.

Forecasters at the Canadian Avalanche Centre had described the conditions in the Fernie and Lizard range on Sunday as "spooky" and able to generate avalanches easily capable of killing a person.

Sgt. Craig said that some people in the area may not have known the level of danger.

"It seemed to catch some people by surprise. They were rated high yesterday, but once the avalanche techs went out yesterday, in their opinion it was extreme," he said.

Meanwhile, rescuers are searching for two missing snowmobilers near Vernon, B.C.

It's the second time in four days that search-and-rescue teams have been called out to find overdue snowmobilers in the North Okanagan region.

The latest search began at 11 p.m. Sunday night when the pair were reported overdue.

Teams continued to scour an area known as Hunter's Range, about 40 kilometres north of Vernon.

Searchers were called to the same area on Boxing Day, when a lone snowmobiler failed to return from an outing.

He was found, safe but cold, at about 9 p.m. Friday night, stuck in deep, fresh snow.

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