

Seven bodies recovered from avalanche area

Police call off search for the night

By Kelly Sinoski and Jason van Rassel December 29, 2008 7:01 PM



Several hundred residents of Sparwood attended a candle-light vigil in the small B.C. town to honour the men buried in an avalanche while snowmobiling near Fernie on Sunday.

Photograph by : Gavin Young/CNS

SPARWOOD, B.C. — Hopes of a miracle for eight snowmobilers caught in a pair of avalanches in British Columbia were dashed Monday as police announced that seven bodies had been found.

The discovery of the seventh body was announced at an evening news conference in Fernie, B.C.

Police also announced they've called off the search for the night because of weather.

RCMP Cpl. Chris Faulkner had earlier announced the discovery of six bodies, saying the remains had not yet

been identified.

The men went missing after a pair of avalanches Sunday near Fernie in southeastern B.C.

Families of the men were supporting each other after receiving the grim news Monday, police said.

"The immediate families of most of the victims are all congregated together, in support of each other," said Faulkner.

"I believe that they all expect the worst in a situation like this."

Officials had acknowledged all day that time was working against the missing men, who were from nearby Sparwood, a community of about 4,000 people.

"I think that in situations like these, searchers put the labour in front of their emotions and you almost have to set that aside and go out and do the job that you're trained to do, that you're asked to do and the emotional impact grips you once it's over," said Faulkner.

Police haven't officially released their names, but those missing or dead have been identified as Warren Rothel, Thomas Talarico, Kane Rusnak, Danny Bjarnason, Leonard Stier and his son Michael Stier, Kurt Kabel and Blaine Wilson.

The eight were part of a group of 11 men, believed to be in their 20s and 30s, who were experienced in the sport of snowmobiling but were not considered veterans.

Several of the men had children.

A candlelight vigil was being held Monday night in Sparwood as a town faced a tragic end to two days of searching.

"The entire town is going to be crushed," said Lana, a longtime friend of some of the men who didn't want her last name published.

"It would be bad enough to heal after one. How do you heal after eight?"

Lana said she has known one of the men, Kurt Kabel, since she was five years old.

She described him as a protector and good influence during her teenage years — so much so, her father always wanted him to accompany her when they went out.

"If I was allowed to go out, I made sure he was able to go out with me," she said.

Kabel, believed to be in his late 20s, married earlier this year and he and his wife have an infant son. He works at a hydraulic equipment repair company in Sparwood.

Lana said another man, Blaine Wilson, and his girlfriend are the godparents of her young son.

Wilson, also in his mid- to late-20s was a frequent companion of Lana's boyfriend on hunting trips in the area. He's a heavy duty mechanic for a Sparwood company.

"He's the best hunting companion there is. They thrived on climbing up the mountains and hunting together," she said.

RCMP said the men were all wearing avalanche beacons when they were riding together Sunday in the

Flathead Valley, 40 kilometres southwest of Fernie.

Police said some members from a group of seven snowmobilers were buried by an avalanche in the Harvey Pass area — a popular backcountry snowmobile destination.

A second group of four snowmobilers heard yelling from the area and came to the aid of members from the first group who were in the process of digging out their fellow riders.

The RCMP said the newly formed group was able to locate one rider, but as they were digging him out at a depth of about three metres, a second avalanche came down and buried the entire group.

Two of the buried riders managed to get themselves out within about 20 minutes. These two used avalanche beacons to locate a third buried victim who they rescued after an additional 20 minutes of digging.

The Provincial Emergency Program was notified when automated distress calls were received from communications devices worn by the snowmobilers. A helicopter was dispatched to the scene to pick up two of the three survivors. The third survivor was transported by ground with the assistance of Fernie Search and Rescue personnel.

Fernie Mayor Cindy Corrigan, said the men should not have ventured out into that particular area because the avalanche risk was high.

"I'm quite devastated by it all," she said. "But the conditions we've had over the past few days are just so severe, so it's a shame that they decided to go into the backcountry."

Fernie is located about 320 kilometres southwest of Calgary.

The incident happened just two days after the Canadian Avalanche Centre issued a special avalanche warning to recreational backcountry users in B.C.'s south coast and North Shore regions for the weekend.

CAC forecaster James Floyer warned Friday that the avalanche danger in the Columbia Mountains south of Revelstoke to the U.S. border and east of the Okanagan Valley to Golden, Invermere and Cranbrook would increase quickly with significant snowfall.

The Canadian Avalanche Centre says that, from 1978 to 2007, an average of 11 avalanche fatalities occurred per year in Canada.

Last winter season, 18 Canadians were killed in avalanches. The worst year on record was the 2002 to 2003 season, when 29 Canadians died in avalanches. Before that, in 1997 and 1998, there were 21 deaths.

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