

December 29, 2008

Seven Bodies Recovered in Canada Avalanches

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 11:22 p.m. ET

FERNIE, British Columbia (AP) -- Search teams recovered the bodies of seven snowmobilers Monday, a day after they were swept away by avalanches in western [Canada's](#) backcountry, police said. An eighth man was missing and believed dead.

The bodies were found late Monday afternoon as searchers plowed through avalanche debris near Fernie in British Columbia's Elk Valley, about 550 miles east of Vancouver, said Royal Canadian Mounted Police Cpl. Chris Faulkner.

Eleven snowmobilers, mainly in their 20's from the nearby coal-mining town of Sparwood, were hit by back-to-back avalanches on Sunday. Eight were buried but three from the group clawed through the snow and reached safety.

Search efforts -- which involved several dozen rescue officials and volunteers as well as search dogs -- had been delayed until later Monday by the threat of more avalanches.

"The snowmobilers were well-outfitted, dressed warmly and many had the proper safety equipment," said Faulkner.

The victims, some of who wore special rescue transmitters, were found under several feet of hard-packed snow, said Chris Thomas, president of Fernie Search and Rescue.

"It's pretty dramatic. In a town of this size, everybody knows everybody. It's gonna cause everybody to think twice about conditions they thought were safe," said Elkford Snowmobile Associate spokesman Peter Cunningham.

The first avalanche buried a group of seven snowmobilers, while they were resting at the foot of a hill, said David Wilks, mayor of Sparwood.

"It appears a cornice let loose -- an overhang on the top of the mountain -- and buried them," he said.

Another group of four snowmobilers heard their shouts, hurried over and started digging when they were hit by a second avalanche.

Two men dug themselves out and then pulled a third man free.

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.

"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," said Wilks. "They had lost their gloves, they had lost everything so they were starting to dig by hand."

The three men sustained minor injuries.

Wilks said all 11 were skilled outdoorsmen who knew each other in the town of 4,000. He said they well-liked in the community and said many had families, including two whose wives gave birth to their first children just a few months ago.

"It's pretty devastating," said Chuck Meadows, a coal mine trucker who worked with most of the men. "It's pretty sad to see, with newly started families."

The Canadian Avalanche Centre had issued an advisory that day warning of dangerous conditions and the strong possibility of avalanches.

"The conditions that we've got in the last few days are so severe that it's a shame they decided to go into the backcountry," Fernie Mayor Cindy Corrigan said.

[Copyright 2008 The Associated Press](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
