

B.C. snowmobiler dies in avalanche

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100 MILE HOUSE, B.C. — The death of a snowmobiler buried under an avalanche in central British Columbia brings to 19 the death toll from snow slides in Western Canada this winter.

RCMP say the man, whose identity was not released, was snowmobiling on Mica Mountain, near 100 Mile House, B.C., on Wednesday when the slide let loose.

Corporal Dan Moskaluk said the victim was completely buried. His friend tried to find him but eventually had to go for help.

“The uninjured snowmobiler had made his way out to a residence near Canim Lake where he contacted police. He then returned to the scene of the slide and continued his search for his friend,” Cpl. Moskaluk said Thursday in a statement.

Other snowmobilers then arrived and joined in the search. They located the victim using an emergency beacon.

“All efforts to revive the man were unsuccessful,” Mr. Moskaluk said. “The snowmobilers were unable to remove the deceased and were forced to vacate the area due to darkness.”

The slide occurred on the same mountain that claimed the lives of two young men while they were snowmobiling on Christmas Eve 2007.

With 19 deaths, it's been a bad year in the B.C. backcountry said John Kelly, operations manager of the Canadian Avalanche Centre. On average, there are 13.6 deaths a year in British Columbia and Alberta.

The snow pack is weak this year, Mr. Kelly said, and the number of backcountry users is increasing.

“Backcountry use is rising sharply... so there's more and more people going out there, dramatically so, and it's unreasonable to expect that there won't be more incidents going along with that and, unfortunately, more fatalities,” Mr. Kelly said.

Studies suggest about 37,000 Canadians backcountry ski, and even more who snowmobile.

Mr. Kelly said the risk of dying in an avalanche has been likened to driving.

Snowmobilers have been hit hardest this year, including eight who were killed in an avalanche near Fernie, B.C., in December.

Mr. Kelly said snowmobilers are not getting the message about the risk and the kind of education efforts aimed at backcountry skiers for the past decade must now focus on the sledders.

“This is a bad year but it's well within our norms,” he said. “What is news is that there are a lot of these accidents that are preventable.”

Education, proper equipment and up-to-date information on the avalanche risk are the keys to reducing deaths, he said.

RCMP, Central Cariboo Search and Rescue and the Transport Ministry were working to stabilize the mountainside Thursday before they could safely remove the body from the remote location, which is not accessible by road.

RCMP said explosive charges may have to be dropped on the snow pack to ensure the snow pack is stable for recovery teams to remove the body.

Police said the B.C. Coroner's Service will be involved in investigating the accident.

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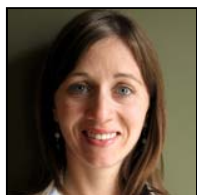
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