

Area was ripe for a slide, forecaster says

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JUSTINE HUNTER
GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
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The challenging terrain of the Harvey Basin where a group of young snowmobilers were buried by an avalanche Sunday was ripe for a slide, an avalanche forecaster said Monday.

The high risk warnings were posted Sunday on the Canadian Avalanche Centre after a week of storms dumped more than half a metre of fresh snow on top of an old, thin snowpack in the area around Fernie, B.C., in the southeast corner of the province.

That new snow, combined with strong winds and warming temperatures, has produced a highly unstable climate for backcountry recreation throughout B.C.'s southern region – and for the rescue teams who continued to search for the missing men just south of Fernie on Monday.

“The setup is fairly predictable,” said Anna Brown, a forecaster from the avalanche centre in Revelstoke, B.C. “The old layer is not only not bonding, it is very weak and loose. So when the avalanches do go at this point, they don't just run on top of the old layer, they start scouring out the entire snowpack right to the ground.”

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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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RCMP on the six confirmed dead

The bodies of six people have been dug out from underneath an avalanche in Fernie, B.C. Two others are still missing.

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In the past week, storms have brought 70 centimetres of new snow in the Fernie area, and nearly one-third of that fell in the 24 hours just before the slides that overtook first a group of seven snowmobilers, then the second group of four men who came to the rescue on Sunday. Three people were able to dig themselves out.

The fresh snow would have been hanging over the lip of the bowl where the men had been travelling, creating a complex series of potential slides that even a skilled backcountry traveller would be challenged to avoid.

Ms. Brown said she doesn't know yet what triggered the slides but stressed it is a volatile climate: “I continue to caution people who are planning to go in the backcountry, that unless they are very good at identifying avalanche terrain, they should probably stay away.”

She would not say if the individuals who were trapped in the avalanche should have avoided the area. “It's a judgment call and people have to make their own choices,” she said.

“There were advisories explaining the snowpack conditions.... The forecast certainly identified the risk. It's fairly unpredictable what the tipping point is going to be.... As a professional, I would keep myself out of large avalanche paths, until this period is over.”

More snowstorms are forecast for the region on Wednesday and Ms. Brown said the avalanche risk will remain high for some time to come. The Canadian Avalanche Centre has warnings posted for the South Rockies, South Columbia and Kootenay-Boundary areas due to frequent avalanches. The warnings state: “Inappropriate conditions for backcountry travel without extensive avalanche training and experience.”

For the Fernie region in particular, the centre advises: “Avalanche professionals are describing the conditions as ‘spooky.’ These are large, dangerous avalanches that could easily kill a person.

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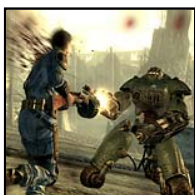
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