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Fernie, Elk Valley - FERNIE AVALANCHE BURIES SNOWMOBILERS

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Fernie: Two avalanches in the mountains outside Fernie has left eight snowmobilers unaccounted for.

The incident took place when some members from a group of seven snowmobilers were buried by an avalanche in the Harvey Pass area – a popular backcountry snowmobile destination located about 40 Km south of Fernie. 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 newly formed group was able to locate one rider, but as they were digging him out at a depth of about three meters a second avalanche came down and buried the entire group. All of them were wearing avalanche beacons.

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

The surviving group of three assessed the slope stability and their surroundings. They were located in a large bowl with massive cornices ready to come down. Based on their risk assessment of the possibility of a third avalanche, they began walking out. Eight snowmobilers are now unaccounted for. All 11 snowmobilers involved are males from the nearby town of Sparwood.

The Provincial Emergency Program was notified about the event at approximately 2:30 PM (Mountain Time) when automated distress calls were received from communications devices worn by the snowmobilers. A helicopter was quickly dispatched to the scene that picked up two of the three survivors. The third survivor was transported by ground with the assistance of Fernie Search and Rescue personnel. The three sustained minor injuries. One will be held in hospital for observation overnight.

A command post was established at the road access point to the scene, but due to the obvious avalanche hazard and growing darkness, the search for survivors had to be postponed until morning.

Approximately 70 CM of new snow has fallen in the mountains surrounding Fernie over the past few days. The Canadian Avalanche Centre is describing the avalanche hazard in this area as "high". A plan is currently being developed that will involve establishing increased slope stability at the avalanche site before the search can resume at first light.

RCMP resources from Elk Valley Detachment and E Division are working with Fernie Search and Rescue and Provincial Emergency Program officials to assist with the search. RCMP avalanche trained police dogs are currently en-route to the scene.

The families of the missing snowmobilers have been notified about this tragedy. No further information will be released at this time. Please monitor www.bc-rcmp.ca for information about an RCMP media availability in Fernie on Monday.

Released by

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