

## Search for eight missing snowmobilers targets avalanche zone near Fernie

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**This file photo shows a helicopter lifting off from the Fernie Hospital Heliport with rescue workers after a group of Swedes went missing several years ago. This file photo shows a helicopter lifting off from the Fernie Hospital Heliport with rescue workers after a group of Swedes went missing several years ago. Crews will be searching for eight**

# missing snowmobilers buried in an avalanche near Fernie today.

## Photograph by : Keith Morison/Canwest News Service file

FERNIE, B.C. - The town of Sparwood is on edge this morning after eight of their own went missing after a pair of avalanches swept through a backcountry area popular with snowmobilers Sunday.

Avalanche technicians are heading into the backcountry of southeastern British Columbia to search for the eight snowmobilers who are feared dead after being buried in an avalanche near Fernie.

At about 10 a.m. local time about 15 avalanche technicians, who have flown to Fernie from all over the province, will be dropped off into the area by helicopter, said David Wilkes, the mayor of Sparwood, B.C., a small community east of Fernie.

"The helicopter will do a search of the area and make sure there are no other avalanche risks, and if there are, they are going to blast those areas and bring all the snow down before the recovery starts," he said.

Wilkes, who knew all of the men in their 20s from the small community of about 4,000 people, said they are "hoping for a miracle" but conceded there was a very slim chance they could have survived for a long night under the heavy snow.

He said they had all the equipment with them including, a device that when the person pulls a chord a bubble is formed providing additional air for the person trapped in the snow. However he said it wouldn't have protected them from the elements.

"The reality is they have been buried in the snow for upward of 24 hours and their oxygen reserves would be, if not depleted, pretty quick depleted and it would be tough to survive this long," he said.

Wilkes spoke to one of the survivors and said he was not doing well and taking the news of his buddies really hard.

"He's going through the 'Why me?' situation right now," he said. "They all grew up together and went to school together and some of them are related, he said. "They were all working the coal mines here and they were just out for a snowmobile like they always do on their days off."

Of the three survivors, one remains in hospital under care, said Wilkes.

The temperature was hovering around -11 C with high winds and snowing early Monday.

RCMP avalanche trained police dogs will be used to search the area described by authorities as rugged terrain with a deep basin. The RCMP said family members have been notified of the "tragedy" but are not yet calling it a recovery mission.

Rescue attempts were called off late Sunday after it grew too dark and dangerous to continue in the avalanche-prone area.

A friend of the men said he's holding out hope his buddies will still be found alive.

"I wish they would find the rest of them it would be kinda nice," the unidentified man told Global News.

“You know a it would be an end to a good New Year and stuff. There are going to be a lot of families that are going to be really hurt.”

Friends described the group as 11 young men in their 20s who were all from Sparwood. They said the friends had some experience in snowmobiling but were not considered veterans at the sport.

RCMP said they were all wearing avalanche beacons when they were riding together Sunday in the Flathead Valley 40 kilometres southwest of Fernie.

The group had reportedly split into two when seven of them were buried in an avalanche at about 2 p.m., said Fernie RCMP.

As the other four tried to dig them out, they were hit by another avalanche, which buried the entire group.

Police said two of the buried riders managed to dig themselves out within 20 minutes and used their avalanche beacons to locate a third man, who was rescued after another 20 minutes of digging.

Fearing a third avalanche, the three began walking out, police said. Two of them were picked up by a helicopter dispatched by the Provincial Emergency Program, which had been notified of the incident at about 2:30 p.m. by automated distress calls from the snowmobilers' communications devices, and taken to hospital in Fernie.

The third man was taken to hospital by ground by the Fernie Search and Rescue personnel. All sustained minor injuries.

Only one remained in hospital overnight for observation, said Interior Health Authority spokeswoman Jennifer Henkes.

The incident occurred 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 avalanche comes after a big freeze in Fernie, followed by a heavy snowfall in the past 10 days and then a thaw.

About 30 centimetres of snow fell in Fernie on Saturday night. Temperatures also rose from -30 C to 0 C Sunday.

With files from the Vancouver Sun, Global News

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