

Seven bodies found in avalanche

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FERNIE, B.C. — Police say a seventh body has been recovered from the scene of two avalanches that struck 11 snowmobilers in southeastern B.C.

One man is still unaccounted for.

Three other men had survived and walked to safety after the back-to-back avalanches on Sunday.

With darkness descending, search efforts have ended for the day and will resume in the morning.



Staff Sgt. Lorne Craig, with Fernie, B.C. RCMP speaks to the media about eight missing snowmobilers Monday. (*Jeff McIntosh/The Canadian Press*)

Videos

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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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Search resumes for missing snowmobilers

More than 15 avalanche technicians are being transported by helicopter to the scene

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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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Hundreds of people were attending a candlelight vigil on Monday as authorities announced the discovery of the seventh body at the site of the avalanches, just south of Fernie in southeastern B.C.

Mayor David Wilks says the tragic accident changed Sparwood, and it will take the community weeks and possibly months to heal.

Mr. Wilks says the men were "good guys" who were out doing what they loved when they died.

Church services for the families and the public are scheduled for Tuesday evening.

Police had said earlier that they still had hope for the eight men, all in their mid-20s and from nearby Sparwood, but time was not on their side.

Asked if the work had moved from search-and-rescue to a recovery operation, RCMP Corporal Chris Faulkner said Monday afternoon: "One would suspect that was the situation. You never want to not hold out hope about recovery, but we are looking at 24 hours after the incident."

Search efforts had been delayed by the need to bomb snow in the area to reduce the chance of more avalanches impeding rescuers. About 25 trained rescue personnel and 25 volunteers were at the site along with two RCMP dogs.

Roads into the area were virtually impassable, further delaying search efforts.

"They go up there with shovels," said Cpl. Faulkner. "It's tough even manoeuvring in that type of snow. The terrain is not stable to begin with. Walking is hard."

Searchers "get an indication by transmitter, then begin shovelling by hand," he added.

Immediate families of most of the eight men were "congregated together supporting each other" at an unspecified location, Cpl. Faulkner said.

"I believe they all expect the worst in a situation like this."

Eleven men were caught in the two avalanches, including two who were able to dig themselves and a third man out. The second slide happened as four snowmobilers were trying to rescue seven others who had just been caught in the first avalanche.

The three survivors initially attempted to rescue the others, but eventually made the wrenching decision to leave the area because they feared the prospect of more avalanches.

"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 David Wilks, mayor of Sparwood, home to all 11 men. "They had lost their gloves, they had lost everything so they were starting to dig by hand."

The three survivors suffered minor injuries.

Mr. Wilks said all 11 men knew each other, and some were related to one another. Reports indicated most or all of the men worked in the coal industry that is the lifeblood of Sparwood, 300 kilometres southwest of Calgary.

Cindy Corrigan, mayor of Fernie, said the men should not have attempted to snowmobile in the area on Sunday. The Canadian Avalanche Centre had issued an advisory that day warning of dangerous conditions and the strong possibility of natural and human-triggered 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," Ms. Corrigan said, noting that coal mines in the area provide extensive avalanche training to employees.

"You would just hope that people listen, but everyone has their own mind and their own will and they'll do as they please. That's a shame because this type of weather and this type of snow — everyone knows it's just a bad combination."

Cpl. Faulkner said he "would hope they knew what the snow conditions had been like the past couple of days."

Mr. 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.

"My understanding from speaking to (one of the survivors) is that they were at the base of the hill, they had done some snowmobiling in the area. They weren't sledding at the time. They were just sitting at the bottom of the hill. It appears a cornice let loose — an overhang on the top of the mountain — and buried them."

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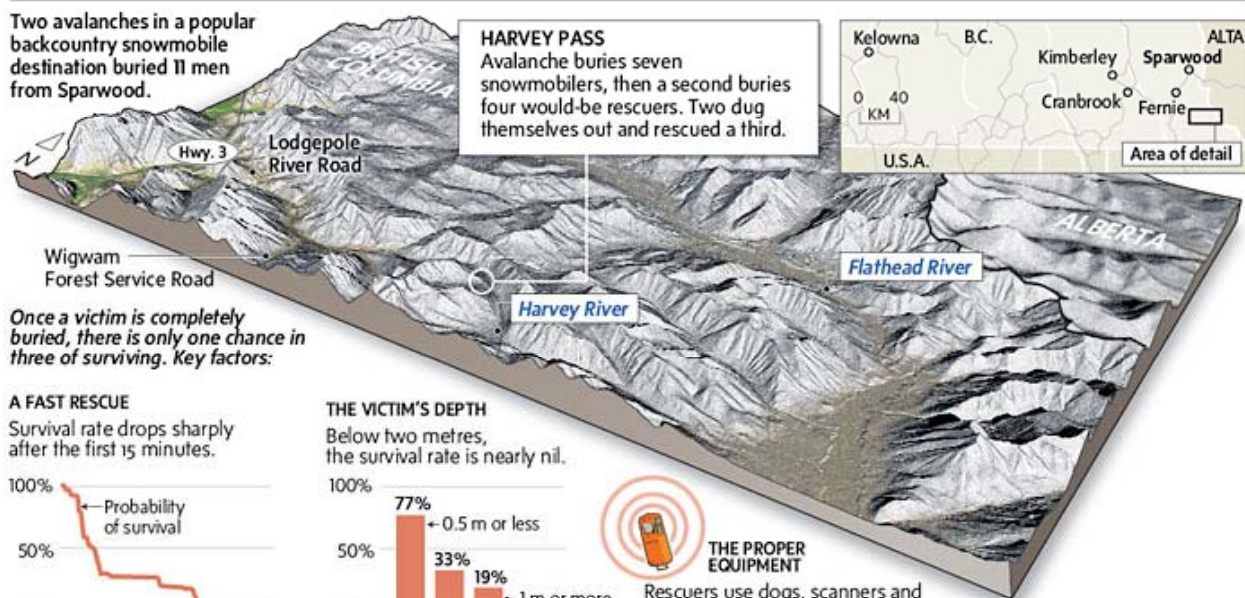


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Two deadly snow slides

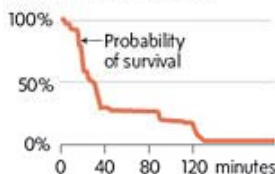
Two avalanches in a popular backcountry snowmobile destination buried 11 men from Sparwood.



Once a victim is completely buried, there is only one chance in three of surviving. Key factors:

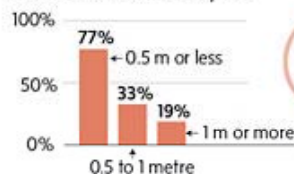
A FAST RESCUE

Survival rate drops sharply after the first 15 minutes.



THE VICTIM'S DEPTH

Below two metres, the survival rate is nearly nil.



THE PROPER EQUIPMENT

Rescuers use dogs, scanners and signals from a victim's transmitter to establish his or her location.