

New rescue system saves time for buried avalanche victims

By PAUL FOY

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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) - Too often, the job of Wasatch Backcountry Rescue is to recover avalanche victims after they've died of suffocation or injuries from trauma.

Now rescuers are hoping to turn the odds in favor of backcountry skiers swept up or buried by avalanches.

The team, made up of ski patrollers and search dogs from Wasatch ski resorts, on Thursday bought a long-range avalanche transceiver system that can work from a helicopter for quick and safe rescues.

With it, rescuers can hover over an avalanche slide and pinpoint the location of buried skiers who wear their own avalanche beacons. It saves time and keeps rescuers out of dangerous terrain. They can drop from a helicopter right on top of a victim.

Ironically, conditions in the Wasatch mountains were too dangerous Thursday for the rescue team to give its new equipment a try. High wind and heavy snowfall grounded a Wasatch Powderbird Guides helicopter - the company assists in avalanche rescues - and canceled plans for a

demonstration.

Wasatch Backcountry Rescue still put its equipment on display. Swiss engineer Manuel Genswein designed the system, which is widely used in Europe but not in North America.

The transceiver, hanging from a helicopter, can pick up a signal from a buried skier from up to 196 yards - triple the range of regular avalanche beacons. Like regular beacons, which skiers strap across their midsection, it can pinpoint at once the locations of multiple avalanche victims.

"Unfortunately, a lot of time we're doing recovery in the backcountry," said Dean Cardinale, assistant snow safety director for Snowbird resort and president of Wasatch Backcountry Rescue.

By the time rescuers get word of an avalanche, it's often too late to save a life. To reach a victim, Cardinale's volunteers often travel by skis over dangerous terrain and in severe weather, slowing their arrival.

That problem was underscored on Tuesday when a snowboarder fell through a wind-swept cornice or snow overhang and triggered an avalanche outside Brighton ski resort, about 18 miles

east of Salt Lake City.

The snowboarder's companion skied to the base of the resort for help, but it took rescuers about 30 minutes to reach the body of Atilio Giorgio Cremaschi Yavar, 27, a Chilean snowboard instructor living in Utah for the winter.

Avalanche victims typically die within 15 minutes from suffocation, although ski patrollers say Yavar appeared to have died of trauma after being dragged down a rocky cliff.

He was found buried in the snow with only a glove showing.

Avalanches are a constant threat in the backcountry and rare at ski resorts, which trigger their own slides before opening chair lifts to keep slopes safe.

The Utah Avalanche Forest Center warned of "widespread" avalanche danger Thursday because of heavy snowfall and strong winds that can load the leeward sides of mountains with loose, unstable snow.

It warned of slab avalanches, the most deadly kind, which can set loose entire slopes many feet thick: "The slabs will pack a punch and could easily tangle you up and drag you down the hill."