

Storms trigger avalanche fatalities

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SALT LAKE CITY — High winds, heavy snow and warming temperatures have combined to produce some of Utah's most dangerous avalanche conditions.

Two men — a snowmobiler and a snowboarder — were killed in separate avalanches Saturday in central Utah, bringing the death toll to six in Utah so far this winter.

That exceeds the casualty count of last winter, when three snowboarders died in a Provo Canyon slide and a snowshoer died in a slide near Deer Valley

ski resort.

"This is an unusual weather pattern, and unusual weather tends to produce unusual avalanches," said Craig Gordon, a Forest Service forecaster at the Utah Avalanche Center.

Recent storms have brought high winds, heavy snowfall and fluctuating temperatures — "the perfect recipe for a slab avalanche," he said.

The center rated avalanche conditions considerable Sunday, a rating that was expected to remain in effect for a few days as a "freight train" of storms delivers more snow.

Garrett Luke Gordan of

Ephraim was snowboarding at about 1 p.m. Saturday when he was swept up in an avalanche near the top of Ephraim Canyon, said Andy Lyon, a Sanpete County Sheriff's Office sergeant.

Gordan, who was carrying an avalanche beacon, was buried for about half an hour before friends dug him out. They tried to resuscitate him while waiting for Sanpete County searchers, who called in a Life Flight helicopter. The 26-year-old was flown to Utah Valley Regional Medical Center in Provo where he was pronounced dead.

An hour later, a snowmobiler was buried under four feet of

snow east of Mount Pleasant in the Choke Cherry Ridge area. David Wayne Johnson, 42, of South Jordan, was dug out by searchers and flown to Sanpete Valley Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

The deaths came as winds of up to 100 mph scoured Utah mountains.

"It's kind of a 'triple whammy,' as we call it," said Bruce Tremper, director of the Avalanche Center. "We get snow, dense and heavy, extremely strong winds and warming temperatures. People without good avalanche skills should definitely avoid the backcountry."