

Weekend avalanches in Wasatch, Sevier counties claim lives of 3 Utahns

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALT LAKE CITY

— Weekend avalanches in Wasatch and Sevier counties claimed the lives of two Utah snowmobilers, while a third Utahn died in an Idaho slide, authorities said.

Sixteen-year-old Zachary Holmes of Farr West, died in a slide near Tower Mountain in the Uinta Mountains Saturday, about 14 miles southeast of Heber City, the Wasatch County sheriff's office said.

The boy was wearing both a helmet and an avalanche beacon, deputy Michael Graves said.

Using the beacon's signal, the boy's cousins tracked his location and dug him out of the snow. They administered CPR, but he later died at the University of Utah Hospital.

Authorities in southwestern Utah's Sevier County were not releasing the name of the 44-year-old Richfield man also killed Saturday after being buried under eight feet of snow in a slide near Signal Peak. A public safety dispatcher said Sunday that officers had not completed notification of the man's family.

Utahn Nicholas Gus Steinmann, 26, of Ogden was not wearing an avalanche beacon when he and three others took snowmobiles into the backcountry near Pulisades Peak, authorities in Bonneville County, Idaho, said.

Steinmann and two others were buried in the noontime slide. The fourth man dug out two people and then all three used tree limbs to probe the slide area for Steinmann, police said. He was eventually found dead under about eight feet of snow, police said.

He is the second Utahn to die in an avalanche out-of-state this season.

Warm weather followed by a few days of heavy mountain snowfall placed the avalanche danger across Utah at "considerable" during the past week, according to postings



CRAIG GORDON/Utah Avalanche Center

In this photo provided by the Utah Avalanche Center, a rescue worker's snowmobile is seen in the aftermath of an avalanche fatality Sunday in the western Uinta Mountains near Heber City, Utah.

by forecasters from the Utah Avalanche Center.

"Considerable" means there is a high likelihood of human triggered and naturally occurring slides, especially at higher elevations and on slopes steeper than 35 degrees, the center Web site explains. Over the past week, about 30 slides have been reported across the Wasatch Front.

In postings Sunday morning, forecasters Craig Gordon and Drew Hardesty both said Saturday was a "very active" day, with numerous human triggered slides and close calls reported in the Uinta Mountains and along the Wasatch Front.

"Is it tricky out there? You bet it is," wrote Gordon. "There are plenty of steep slopes you can ride without incident, giving you a false sense of snow stability, luring you deeper into the avalanche dragons den."

Gordon surveyed the Tower Mountain avalanche area Sunday and estimated the slide at about 2-to-3 feet deep and 300

feet wide. He said it ran about 200 vertical feet. It remained unclear Sunday if authorities believed Holmes and his cousins had triggered the slide.

Sevier County officials said the Signal Peak slide, estimated at 150 feet high and 80 feet wide, was definitely triggered when the Richfield man ran his snowmobile up the backside of the Dixie National Forest peak about 3:30 p.m.

He was also found buried under about eight feet of snow, police said.

The Utah deaths are the first in the state during the winter season, which began in October, according to statistics posted on the Avalanche Center site. Five others have been caught in slides this season — three skiers and two snowshoers — but only one person suffered critical injuries, the data shows.

Utah statistics dating back to 1951 show an average of four people die in avalanches each year. There were three deaths during the 2005-2006 and a record eight deaths during the 2004-2005 season.

Forecasters: Avalanche danger high

Natalie Andrews

DAILY HERALD

Snowy mountains were deadly for four Utahns over the weekend, and forecasters predict the danger to continue for the next two weeks.

Forecasters say that storms in the past eight days have placed heavy snow on a weak snowpack, resulting in high avalanche danger. More than 30 slides were reported last week.

Drew Hardesty, forecaster at the Utah Avalanche Center, said this week's predicted weather of sun, storms and wind will only make conditions more dangerous.

The Utah Avalanche Center listed Provo in the "considerable" danger, or expert use only, category on Monday. The warning continues through today.

"I think the important thing to note is

that the avalanche problem is not going to go away anytime soon," Hardesty said. "Things will remain very dangerous, particularly when the winds and storms roll through."

Unfortunately, some of the most dangerous places are also the most popular for backcountry recreationists. Hardesty listed Aspen Grove, the Timp Divide and the area above Tibble Creek reservoir as the most unpredictable places in Utah Valley.

"Provo mountains are the most radical mountains in the Wasatch," Hardesty said. "People can get in trouble pretty quick."

Hardesty said that even the most experienced skiers are getting caught. While snow settles, he said that skiers should stay at slopes that have a grade of 30



MARIO RUIZ/Daily Herald

Scott Bow [center] watches his daughters **Bethany** and **Hannah** [not pictured] sled down a hill as 9-year-old **Benjamin** [right] and 10-year-old **Rebecca** [left] end their runs near the Stewart Falls trailhead, Monday. The Bows recently moved to Provo from Calgary, Alberta, and did not know of the avalanche that swept through this exact location in 2003.

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degrees, comparable to a blue run at a ski resort.

An avalanche on Sunday brought Utah's weekend avalanche death toll to three, with one Utah man killed in Idaho as well.

A 17-year-old boy from Massachusetts was caught in an avalanche while skiing near Snowbasin ski resort, the Associated Press reported.

On Saturday, Nicholas Guss Steinmann, 26, of Ogden was killed while snowmobiling in Bonneville County, Idaho. Sixteen-year-old Zachary Holmes of Farr West died in a slide near Tower Mountain in the Uinta Mountains, about 14 miles southeast of Heber City, the Wasatch County Sheriff's Office reported. Also Saturday, a 44-year-old Richfield snowmobiler died in a slide near Signal Peak in Sevier County.

The Utah deaths are the first in the state during this winter season, which began in

October, according to statistics posted on the Avalanche Center Web site. Five others have been caught in slides — three skiers and two snowshoers — but only one person suffered critical injuries.

Utah statistics dating back to 1951 show that an average of four people die in avalanches each year, the AP reports. There were three deaths during the 2005-2006 season and a record eight deaths during the 2004-2005 season.

The National Weather Service reported that Monday's storm left 9 inches of snow at the Spanish Fork Power House by 9 a.m. The Power House has an elevation of 4,720 feet. Pleasant Grove, elevation 4,610 feet, reported 1.5 inches by 5 a.m.

The storm led to a commotion on Interstate 15, with three semi-trailers simultaneously off the road in Payson and 23 property damage-only accidents between 7 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. on Interstate-15 in Utah County.

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Utah County Sheriff's Sgt.

area," Utah County Sheriff's Sgt. George Alexanderson said. The sheriff's office responded to five accidents and assisted other agencies on Monday.

Utah Highway Patrol Trooper Preston Raban said most of the 25 slide-offs could be blamed on going too fast for road conditions, a citable offense.

The National Weather Service forecasts the weather clear until Thursday night, when a 50 percent chance of snow is possible. Snow is predicted for Friday and Saturday as well.

Avalanche info

To hear the Utah Avalanche Center's recorded advisories:

(801) 364-1581
Salt Lake

(801) 364-1591
Salt Lake 6 a.m.
detailed

(801) 742-0830
Little Cottonwood
Canyon

(435) 658-5512
Park City

(801) 626-8600 Ogden

(801) 422-4333 Provo

Or go to the Utah Avalanche Center Web site: <http://www.avalanche.org/~uac/>