

UTAH UTAH POLICE/COURTS

Cottonwood Heights man dies in avalanche

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By Pat Reavy

BIG COTTONWOOD CANYON — For the second time in four days, a skier has died in an avalanche while in Utah's backcountry.

Police said Ricardo Presnell, a 51-year-old Cottonwood Heights man, was killed when he was caught in a large slide near Solitude Ski Resort, thrown into a grove of trees and buried under four feet of snow.

Presnell was skiing with another man and a woman in the Silver Fork region just outside of the ski resort boundaries in the popular Meadows Chutes, when they triggered an avalanche about 1:50 p.m., said Unified Police Lt. Don Hutson.

The large slide was about 800 feet long and 400 feet wide and pushed the victim into a grove of trees, he said.

The woman was above the slide and was not injured. She was able to call 911 on her cell phone. The second man suffered only minor injuries and started looking for his friend immediately, Hutson said.

All were wearing locator beacons and carrying shovels and probes. When ski patrol members from the Wasatch Backcountry Rescue team arrived, one of Presnell's feet



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Rescuers respond to the scene of an avalanche near Solitude Ski Resort on Wednesday. This is the third avalanche in a week. Jason Olson, Deseret News

had already been uncovered.

Officials estimated the victim was buried for about 15 minutes.

He had no pulse and was not breathing when he was found, Hutson said. He also suffered obvious trauma.

In addition to digging Presnell out of the snow, Hutson said rescuers had to cut down trees to reach him. He was taken to an ambulance waiting in the Solitude parking lot, but emergency workers were unable to revive him.

The tragedy is the second this week. Sunday, 42-year-old Todd Bell of South Weber died in an avalanche while skiing in an out of bounds area near Snowbasin.

Friday, a 22-year-old man was caught in an avalanche in an out-of-bounds area near Brighton, but was dug out and saved by a friend. The man suffered only minor injuries.

Craig Garden, a forecaster with the Utah Avalanche Center, who was on scene at Wednesday's accident, said the conditions in the backcountry the past week had the potential to fool even the most experienced recreationists.

"The avalanche dragon lures people into its den," he said. "These are extremely dangerous times in Utah's backcountry right now."

Garden said it was an unusual snowpack because of the 4 to 7 new feet of snow on top of very old, crusty snow that could easily break away, especially with the recent high winds on steep angled slopes.

"It's the perfect recipe for a really dangerous avalanche," Garden said.

Even though the man killed Wednesday had all the proper backcountry gear, Garden compared the situation to an airbag in a vehicle. It's not full protection.

"You can't allow the accident to happen," he said.

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