

Utah skier dies after being caught in avalanche

SALT LAKE CITY—Rescuers had to cut down some trees to retrieve the body of a backcountry skier who was swept more than 800 feet down a slope Wednesday by an avalanche, police said.

The 51-year-old Utah man was buried for more than 15 minutes in four feet of snow Wednesday, but probably died of blunt-force trauma, said Unified Police Lt. Don Hutson.

Ricardo Presnell, of the Salt Lake City suburb of Cottonwood Heights, was with a group of skiers outfitted with avalanche beacons and shovels. He stepped first onto the slope and triggered a 400-foot-wide slide, Hutson said.

Another skier found Presnell's location using a beacon signal but was

able to dig out only one of the skier's boots before members of Wasatch BackCountry Rescue arrived to finish the job. He was pronounced dead about 3:15 p.m. Wednesday.

It was the second avalanche death of the week in Utah's Wasatch Range and ninth for the season in the West, according to the U.S. Forest Service's National Avalanche Center in Ketchum, Idaho. The other Utah skier died Sunday in the backcountry outside Snowbasin ski area.

The Utah Avalanche Center was urging people to stay out of the northern Utah mountains, which have received more than seven feet of snow in the past 10 days.

Officials rated Wednesday's avalanche potential "considerable,"

which means human-triggered slides are likely.

That rating, two steps below "extreme," is often misconstrued by skiers to mean the backcountry is relatively safe. It's also the rating under which most avalanche fatalities happen.

The Utah Avalanche Center said many slides are breaking loose three to seven feet deep, taking out the entire season's snowpack and making it almost impossible for a skier to survive an avalanche.

Wednesday's fatality occurred off Big Cottonwood Canyon, just east of Salt Lake City, on a popular backcountry slope called Meadow chutes in Silver Fork Canyon. Rescuers reached the victim from nearby Solitude Ski Resort.