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Avalanche kills man climbing fourteener

GAZETTE AND NEWS SERVICES

CHAFFEE COUNTY - The body of a Colorado Springs climber buried in an avalanche on La Plata Peak was recovered Sunday, according to the Chaffee County Sheriff's Office.

The climber was one of three who triggered an avalanche on the 14,336-foot peak Saturday about 25 miles north of Buena Vista, authorities said.

Kyle Fitzpatrick, 22, died in the avalanche Saturday afternoon, according to the Sheriff's Office. David Bennett and Joel Sabersma, both of Colorado Springs, tried to rescue Fitzpatrick and then hiked for help.

Fitzpatrick triggered the avalanche, which carried him and Sabersma down the mountain, authorities said. Bennett rescued Sabersma, who was partly buried.

The men searched for Fitzpatrick for more than two hours but were unable to find him.

Sabersma was treated for injuries at a Leadville hospital. Bennett was not injured.

Rescuers found Fitzpatrick's body shortly before noon Sunday. He was buried in six feet of snow, officials said.

The Colorado Avalanche Information Center said it received reports of about 50 avalanches Saturday.

"We're in the middle of a pretty good wet slide cycle," said Scott Toepfer, a forecaster with the center. "That means early in the morning when snowpack is frozen it's pretty stable, but as the sun comes up and temperatures increase, avalanche danger rises accordingly."

Toepfer said temperatures in the mountains were climbing into the 50s, which he called unheard of in March.

Unaware of the tragedy on La Plata Peak, the El Paso County Search and Rescue team held avalanche field training Sunday on Pikes Peak.

"If you are traveling in the backcountry and there is an avalanche potential, it is important to carry an avalanche beacon, probe pole and also an avalanche shovel," said Tim Nagle, one of 60 volunteers with the team.

He said to check with the Avalanche Information Center before going into the backcountry. Sporting-goods stores offer safety classes, he said.

"An avalanche needs a trigger, and it is usually someone who is walking across the slope," Nagle said. "If found in 15 minutes, you have a 90 percent chance of survival."

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