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Article Published: Monday, March 22, 2004

Body recovered after avalanche at La Plata Peak

By George Merritt

Denver Post Staff Writer

The body of a climber lost in an avalanche Saturday was recovered Sunday morning, according to the Chaffee County Sheriff's Office.

Kyle Fitzpatrick, 22, and two other hikers, all from Colorado Springs, were making their way down the western face of La Plata Peak north of Buena Vista when they triggered the slide that caught Fitzpatrick and one of his fellow climbers, Joel Sabersma, at about 3:30 p.m.

The third climber in the group, David Bennett, was able to dig out Sabersma, who was partially buried. Bennett and Sabersma then searched approximately 2 1/2 hours for Fitzpatrick, the sheriff's office said, but could not find him. They hiked out and reported him missing at about 10 p.m.

Chaffee County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue, along with teams from Summit, Gunnison,

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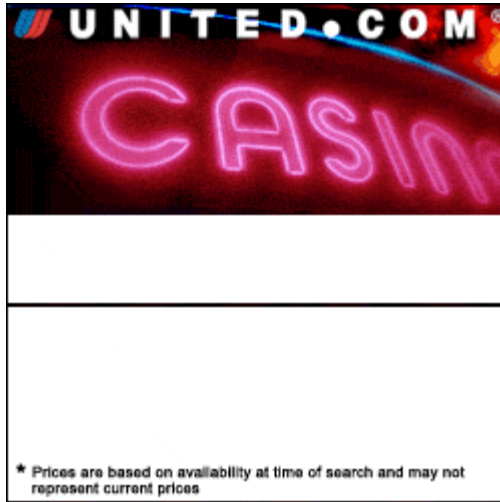
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Fremont and Lake counties, began a search for Fitzpatrick at daybreak Sunday. They found his body under about 6 feet of

snow after a search dog from Crested Butte picked up the scent, according to a news release.

The avalanche, reported to be 200 meters wide and 500 meters long, and the cause of Fitzpatrick's death are still under investigation, the Sheriff's Office said.

Sabersma was transported to St. Vincent's Hospital in Leadville for treatment of unspecified injuries. Bennett was not hurt.

The Colorado Avalanche Information Center told The Associated Press that it had reports of about 50 avalanches Saturday.

"We're in the middle of a pretty good wet-slide cycle," said forecaster Scott Toepfer. "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 getting into the 50s, which he called unheard of for March.

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