

# Huge avalanche in Fernie triggers warning for Alberta

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A huge avalanche that uprooted 200-year-old trees near Fernie has sparked warning of a dangerous shift in snow conditions in Alberta and British Columbia.

The Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC) learned Wednesday morning of the slip, which was rated 4.5 out of 5 for avalanche strength and ran past historical avalanche boundaries in the valley.

CAC avalanche warning service manager Karl Klassen said the conditions were the worst he'd seen in several years, and signalled a shift to less frequent but bigger avalanches in the region.

"The thing that is catching my attention is slowly but surely the sizes are starting to creep up and that's often the first indication.

"My guess is over the next five to six days we're going to see a gradual decrease in the number of avalanches. Natural avalanche activity will probably stop within a few days."

Sustained dry weather had created a layer of snow in the mountains with a hard, smooth surface, Klassen said, and recent snow falls of up to two metres would not stick to it well. New snow was also compacting, settling into "slabs" that could cling together across entire mountainsides. That snow would give way less often, but more seriously.

"You have potential for very large avalanches where fracture lines will be hundreds or thousands of metres instead of dozens," Klassen said.

"Entire slopes will fail, entire mountainsides will fail, sometimes even multiple mountainsides."

Klassen said the conditions were much more dangerous than a regular "storm snow" avalanche cycle — where fresh, unstable snow gave way in many, small slips.

"As we move out of the high-frequency ... phase a lot of those signs of instability start to go away. You don't see as many avalanches, so you don't have the visual clue.

"You have a surface that looks calm and serene and is very attractive for skiers and snowmobilers but you have this shark of a layer ... two metres down. People have either forgotten it or written it off because it's not showing obvious signs of instability."

Fewer avalanches could lead to danger ratings in forecasts dropping, Klassen said, but risk management advice included in avalanche reports would warn of the underlying threat.

He urged back country enthusiasts to resist their adventurous instincts where snow conditions looked to be perfect.

"Learning how to enjoy riding on moderate terrain, instead of having to have that adrenaline rush, those are the kinds of things that will keep you safe.

"Just wait, wait, wait much longer than you're used to."

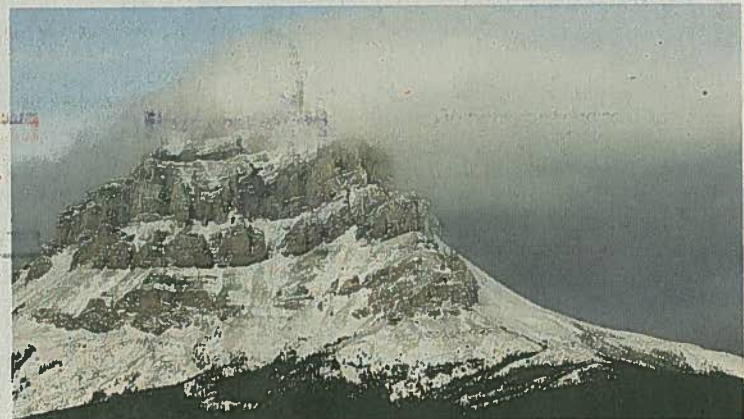
Fernie Search and Rescue manager Simon Piney said initial responses to snow emergencies could be smaller or slower when crews faced the danger of big avalanches.

"When we have a high hazard rating and/or a risk of very high-consequence avalanches we will have to take mitigating steps."

The avalanche that killed eight snowmobilers in a party of 11 near Fernie in December 2008 was a good example of the danger level hindering the speed of a rescue, he said.

"We did have to make use of explosives to stabilize the area. We were lucky we were able to get in that night and save three people, literally just as the sun was going down."

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Postmedia News/File

A huge avalanche in the Fernie area Wednesday has sparked a warning of a dangerous shift in snow conditions.