

Avalanche toll down, but officials aren't encouraged

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CALGARY — The number of people killed in avalanches over the last year was less than half the number killed the year prior, reports the Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC).

The 2009-2010 avalanche season, which wrapped up at the start of this month, saw 12 people killed by avalanches.

That's down significantly from the 26 people who lost their lives in the same time frame in 2008-2009.

Despite the decrease, avalanche officials are cautious of saying things have changed for the better.

John Kelly, operations manager of the CAC, said a March 13 slide that killed business partners Shay Snortland, 33, of Lacombe, and Kurtis Reynolds, 33, of Strathmore, during the Big Iron Shootout on Boulder Mountain illustrates the level of continued risk.

"While there has been a decrease in the number of fatalities last year, we are wary of calling it a trend," said Kelly.

"The fact that there were so few fatalities last year may be just luck; the Boulder accident alone could easily have been the worst accident in Canadian history."

As the 2010-2011 season begins, the CAC will put continued emphasis on awareness about avalanches in the snowmobiling community about avalanches.

"This is the user group that has quickly overtaken all other groups in our fatality statistics, and we know that riders with avalanche education remain the minority," said Kelly.

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