

Man dies in abandoned mine

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Poisonous gas claimed the life of a 20-year-old Mesa County man who ventured too far into an abandoned mine just east of Mount Garfield on Saturday, authorities said.

The man's two friends sat in rescue vehicles at the west end of G 7/10 Road near Palisade on Saturday evening as fire department personnel, dressed in air tanks and masks, tried to reach their friend — 100 yards deep in the gated Gearhart coal mine.

The names of the victim and his companions, one of who also is 20, were not released Saturday night pending notification of relatives, said Rick Wagner of the Mesa County Sheriff's Department.

"People should use a little common sense and respect," U.S. Bureau of Land Management District Ranger Dick Godwin said as he coordinated officers who were to drive up Coal Creek Canyon from Cameo to the top of Mount Garfield to retrieve the body. "Mother Nature is unforgiving."

The three had apparently ascended the steep, but popular, Mount Garfield trail that climbs from a parking lot just west of the Palisade exit off Interstate 70.

They planned to explore the mines, said

deputy John Cooper.

Two men entered the mine while a third climbed to the top of the ridge. The man on the ridge saw one of his friends stagger out of the mine below him and descend toward the parking lot, Cooper said. By the time the third man arrived at the bottom, authorities were en route, having been called about 4:30 p.m. by the man who came out of the mine, Cooper said.

"He was being overcome with noxious gas," Cooper said of the man who staggered out. "He was dizzy. Fighting losing consciousness, he lost track of his friend."

Wagner said authorities immediately suspected the gases that linger in the many abandoned coal mines that dot the south face of the Bookcliffs region.

Grand Junction Fire Department rescue personnel were ferried by St. Mary's AirLife helicopter to a ridgetop just east of the mine from a command post at the west end of G 7/10 Road. They then descended to the mine.

A stream of lights flickered from the ridgetop down toward the mine against the dark apron of the Bookcliffs.

This is the second mine tragedy in the Bookcliffs in six years.

Three Grand Junction High School students were killed Aug. 13, 1989, when they ventured

into the Bookcliff mine north of 27 1/4 Road and were overcome by gases. Three others survived. The mine was eventually sealed.

Godwin said the Colorado Division of Mines a few years ago came through and attempted to seal off as many mines as possible as a safety precaution.

"They blew them shut or put gates over the ones they couldn't shut," Godwin said.

The Gearhart Mine had an iron-bar gate set about four feet into the entrance.

People during the past few years pulled away rocks between the gate and the sidewall, said 15-year-old Tyler Wallace, who lives at the end of G 7/10 road and watched as his driveway was turned into the command post.

Wallace said he has hiked in the area quite a bit, but has never ventured into the mine shaft. Explorers eventually carved a hole wide enough to squeeze by the gate.

"You'd have to be real skinny to fit by," said neighbor Neil Nash, 20. Wallace and Nash said the area is popular with hikers, but most usually climb Mount Garfield.

"You could climb in but you are pretty dumb if you do," 13-year-old Jamie Somerville said as he watched yet another helicopter ferry personnel to the top. "There is methane and dead air in there. I've been told not to go in."



Dean Humphrey/Daily Sentinel

Members of the Mesa County Search and Rescue Control take part in the search for a 20-year-old man who died in an abandoned coal mine near Mount Garfield on Saturday.

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