

Coroner: Teen hunter froze to death

By Dana M. Nichols, Stockton Record

SAN ANDREAS – A 14-year-old Angels Camp boy found dead in a remote mountain area last week apparently succumbed to exposure, the Calaveras County Coroner said Monday.

Taylor Dustin froze to death after he and his uncle, Devin Smith of Douglas Flat, got lost during a hunting trip in Alpine County, officials said.

Smith, 40, survived, but suffered from hypothermia.

Calaveras County coroner Kevin Raggio arranged an autopsy on behalf of Alpine County. The initial results of the autopsy indicate it was the cold that killed Dustin, although results won't be official until some other lab tests are completed in a month, Raggio said.

The Alpine County Sheriff's Department said in a written statement that it got a 911 call at 5:30pm Oct. 21 indicating that two hunters who had left their Hermit Valley camp site that morning had not returned as expected.

Search and rescue teams from Alpine and Calaveras counties responded even as weather conditions deteriorated. The Alpine County Sheriff's Department reported that 18 inches of snow fell over the next two days as searchers looked for Dustin and Smith.

Calaveras County Search and Rescue President Greg Jacobus referred questions about the search to law enforcement agencies.

But Jacobus did say conditions were difficult.

“The weather just closed in very quickly and made this very very dangerous,” he said.

The Alpine County Sheriff’s Department said it was almost two days later, at 3pm Oct. 23, that searchers found Smith in the Stevenot Camp area of the Mokelumne Wilderness, several miles from Hermit Valley.

Smith was suffering from severe hypothermia and was transported by air ambulance to a hospital. Searchers found Dustin’s body nearby about 6pm that day.

Raggio said that relatives of Dustin and Smith have been declining media interview requests.