

5 backcountry snowboarders die in Colorado

By Electa Draper, Denver Post

Five backcountry snowboarders are confirmed dead in Colorado's deadliest avalanche since 1962.

The avalanche at Loveland Pass on Highway 6 struck between 1 and 2:30, the Clear Creek County Sheriff's Office announced late Saturday afternoon.

The sheriff's office said there was one confirmed survivor.

Sheriff Don Krueger said the avalanche occurred near the Loveland Ski Area, but outside its boundaries.

"I believe that at this point in time everyone is accounted for, but I'm not sure," Krueger said.

He said the survivor was up and walking around. No information has been released about the five victims. It was unclear whether they were still buried.

Colorado Avalanche Information Center forecaster Spencer Logan said there have been weak layers in Colorado's snowpack since early January, and forecasters have said they're seeing the worst avalanche danger in 30 years.

A snowboarder was killed in an avalanche Thursday in Avalanche Bowl south of Vail Pass. He was making runs with two friends after they were dropped off at the top of the bowl by a friend with a snowmobile.

"Our last series of storms made them more active again," he said. "Over the last week and a half, that area got over 18 inches of snow, so if you melted that that would be 2 inches of water, so that is a heavy load."

Highway 6 at Loveland Pass, elevation 11,990 feet, was closed by the Colorado Department of Transportation as many skiers were headed home from nearby Arapahoe Basin ski resort.

Lisa Clarke Devore, who was headed back to Denver from the resort, told the Associated Press she saw a fire truck and ambulance on the pass, as well two search dogs headed into the area of the slide. She says she saw several ambulances, including one towing snowmobiles, driving toward the pass.

U.S. avalanche deaths climbed steeply around 1990 to an average of around 24 a year as new gear became available for backcountry travel. Until then, avalanches rarely claimed more than a handful of lives each season in records going back to 1950.

In 1962, seven people were killed when an avalanche buried residences.