

Snowbound motorists rescued after night in the Ochocos

by Cheryl McDermott

Two brothers and a nine-year-old boy were rescued Monday morning after getting their pickup stuck in the snow, becoming lost as they walked ten miles in a circle, and spending a cold night huddled in their snowbound vehicle in the Ochoco National Forest, authorities reported.

Richard Hill, 39; Robert Hill, 43; and Robert's nine-year-old son left their Prineville homes early Sunday morning to go on what was expected to be a daylong outing of shooting in the woods. When they hadn't returned by dark, family members became worried.

Shortly after 9 p.m., Richard was able to get cell phone coverage and called his family to let them know their 1999 GMC pickup was stuck in the snow and that they planned to start walking toward Paulina. A family friend drove to the area that Richard described, but wasn't able to locate him, Crook County Undersheriff Jim Hensley said.

Family members reported the three missing shortly after midnight, and about 20 minutes later Crook County Sheriff's Search and Rescue mobilized a Hasty Team including four snowmobiles and responded to an area southeast of the Big Summit Prairie area of the Ochoco National Forest.

"We had a general idea of what area the party was stranded in -- the only obstacle was the 18 to 24-inch base of fresh snow on the ground in that area," said Deputy Brandon Smith, Crook County Search and Rescue Coordinator. Sheriff's Office personnel attempted to reach the parties by going through the Big Summit Prairie area from the west and also from the east end of the Ochoco National Forest by driving through Paulina to the area of the Rager Ranger Station district. The team that went to the Rager Ranger Station district area located the individuals, said Hensley.

At about 6:45 a.m. Monday morning, search teams located the Hills huddled inside their vehicle on an isolated United States Forest Service road on the south edge of Big Summit Prairie.

Richard and Robert said that they had walked nearly ten miles thinking that they were walking toward Paulina. To their surprise, they walked in a big circle and stumbled back into their vehicle.

"The three were cold and hungry but otherwise in good shape. Richard and Robert made some very

good decisions that contributed to this being a successful rescue mission. First, they chose to stay together. Second, all three were dressed in layers and had enough clothing and supplies to stay warm. Third, they remembered to take their cell phones with them, found cell service and notified family of their distress," said Smith.

The Hills were transported out of the forest on snowmobiles, two sleds owned by members of the search and rescue team, and two belonging to the Sheriff's Office.

This was the first time the Crook County Sheriff's Office had occasion to use the snowmobiles in a search and rescue mission, Hensley said. Acquired in December 2006, the snowmobiles were purchased after an incident in the Ochoco National Forest on December 5 of last year, where rescuers found it difficult to reach an injured party. In that incident, rescuers had to carry the individual through deep snow to reach an AirLife helicopter.

"This incident was definitely one that the snowmobiles were needed," said Hensley.

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