

Cause of plane crash under investigation

By Randi Pierce, Staff Writer



SUN photo/Mike Pierce

The wreckage of a plane that crashed in Pagosa Country earlier this month. Both occupants of the plane, from Albuquerque, were killed in the crash. More than 1,000 hours of searching went into finding the wreckage.

More than 1,000 hours logged looking for downed craft

More than 1,000 man hours went into finding the Albuquerque, N.M., plane that recently crashed in southern Archuleta County, with that work being completed primarily by volunteers.

Now, an investigation is underway to determine why the plane crashed.

The plane was found by search crews shortly after noon on Wednesday, Nov. 19, after being reported missing to the Archuleta County Sheriff's Office the evening of Nov. 17.

According to Archuleta County Sheriff Rich Valdez, the Air Force contacted the ACSO's Division of Emergency Management at 7:23 p.m. Monday, Nov. 17, reporting that a small, private plane was believed to be missing.

The last locational ping from the aircraft was located in Archuleta County, Valdez said.

The New Mexico State Police also received a report of the incident the night of Nov. 17, when the NMSP Albuquerque District received a call from the Albuquerque Police Department regarding locating a missing airplane occupied by two people.

Those people, according to the NMSP, were Howard Guthrie, 55, and girlfriend Melissa Watson, 42, both of Albuquerque. Both were deemed missing after Watson failed to show up for work and were later found deceased at the scene of the crash.

The press release indicates that the pair left the Moriarty, N.M., airport in a Mooney M20C the prior weekend en route to Pagosa Springs to ski. Further information indicated the plane was turned around due to inclement weather and was not able to land in Pagosa.

Under investigation

A probable cause of the accident will not be released any time soon.

Plane crashes are investigated by the Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board.

According to Terry Williams of the NTSB, investigations into the probable causes of plane crashes take about one year.

"We're still in the fairly early stages of this investigation," he said.

Williams said last week's initial phase of the investigation was the on-scene phase, where the wreckage was examined and the engine was taken to a secure facility for further examination.

In addition to the wreckage and the aircraft itself, Williams explained that investigations also look at the maintenance of the aircraft, look at the activities of the pilot for the 72-hour period leading up to the crash, and the environment, among other factors.

Hours of searching

A U.S. Air Force C-130 flew the area with FLIR (forward looking infrared) the night of Nov. 17, but was "unsuccessful in locating any evidence of the missing aircraft."

Archuleta County search personnel formed three ground teams to begin searching a portion of Archuleta County around 5:30 a.m. Nov. 18, and three aircraft and one military helicopter were involved in the search, Valdez reported. On Wednesday, the largest operational day, the search teams expanded to include additional personnel from outside Archuleta County.

From the Nov. 17 notification of the missing plane to the wrap-up after the plane was found on Nov. 19, more than 1,000 man hours were put into the search by at least 89 people in Archuleta County, said Thad McKain, Archuleta County director of emergency management.

McKain reported the following numbers from the Archuleta County portion of the search:

- Emergency management personnel, command staff and ground searchers equated to 51 personnel, with those 51 people putting in about 513 total hours, the equivalent of more than 21 full, 24-hour days.
- Between Tuesday and Wednesday, Civil Air Patrol provided about 24 crew members, who worked a total of 288 hours. That is the equivalent of 7.2 40-hour work weeks.
- A total of 14 crew members manned military assets that flew over Archuleta County (not counting any ground crews associated with those assets), with that crew putting in a total of 236 hours.

McKain estimated that "well over" 90 percent of the operation's work was completed by volunteers.

“There’s not enough that can be said about the volunteers that were involved in all this and have been involved in all the hunting searches,” McKain said, adding later, “We have a lot of talented people.”

“I was extremely impressed with everybody that was willing to take their time to put into this,” Valdez said after the aircraft was found on Nov. 19, noting that some search and rescue volunteers took vacation from their jobs in order to help on the search. “We couldn’t have done it without them.”

McKain added that, without the volunteer searchers, the county would have likely needed to call in a larger entity to help search, such as the National Guard or larger task forces available.

“This whole community would not function in emergency responses without volunteers,” McKain said, adding, “The volunteers are what makes us and I can’t pay enough compliment to their dedication and professionalism.”

In addition to the local groups involved, which included the ACSO, U.S. Forest Service, Upper San Juan Search and Rescue, a local incident management group, coroner Carl Macht and a local chaplain for the searchers, several other area agencies stepped in to help, including Trevor Denney with the state’s emergency management department, La Plata and Mineral County search and rescue teams, Southern Ute rangers, Civil Air Patrol, New Mexico Search and Rescue, AMOC (Air Marine Operations Center) and AFRCC (Air Force Rescue Coordination Center).

McKain noted that additional resources in Denver, Colorado Springs, Albuquerque, Mineral County and La Plata County helped from afar.

“All in all, the process, kind of being a first time for me while I’ve been here, went extremely well.” McKain said, noting that the ground and air operations worked separately, but coordinated with each other. “We definitely learned some things having that many different pieces of the pie working.”

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This story was posted on November 26, 2014.

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