

## **Search Continues for Snowmobilers Missing Since Sunday**

by Matt Leader

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The Livingston County Sheriff's Office was expected to resume Wednesday morning the search for two missing snowmobilers on Conesus Lake, though they are now calling it a recovery effort.

The search, which began Sunday, was called off due to darkness at around 5:30 p.m. Tuesday evening.

Livingston County Sheriff Thomas J. Dougherty confirmed the two missing men, who he identified as Christopher Copeland of Livonia and Jason Fluet of Rochester, both 40, had not been recovered Tuesday.

Dougherty said Monday afternoon during a briefing at Vitale Park that sonar teams picked up three points of interest on Sunday. The locations were mapped and divers went into the water later to check them out.

"When they (divers) go in, we don't want them to stay there and do nothing (so) we mark the points so they spend as little time in the water as possible," said Dougherty. "If it was summertime and 70 degrees, it'd be different (but) with these temperatures and the water temperature and the wind – all those factors go in."

Two more points were picked up during Monday's search, but again, to no avail.

"We'll keep going," said Dougherty, shoulders hunched against a biting wind. "We want to bring these two men home to their families. The only way we'd stop is if we just ran out of options and there was no other technology available, no other search points."

Copeland and Fluet went snowmobiling late Friday night into early Saturday morning. After not returning home, concerned family members contacted authorities early Sunday morning.

The search has been on ever since.

With the assistance of drone technology, authorities on Sunday were able to locate and follow snowmobile tracks onto the lake from one of the men's homes. While two helmets have been recovered, officials have not located the men or the snowmobile. An underwater robot has also been used.

Currents and winds have complicated the search which has included areas of the lake that are open water and other areas that are underneath a layer of ice.

In addition to freezing temperatures and changing weather conditions, the Sheriff's Office's search has been complicated by poor water visibility, which has made visual searches by divers "extremely difficult."

"From what they're telling me, they're not dealing with a lot of seaweed but more (poor) visibility with the water – that does make it extremely difficult," said Dougherty. "If it was clear, you could put divers in and they'd have a good vantage point to be able to look around."

Dougherty said the families of the two men are walking a line between hope and resignation to the likelihood that their loved ones are no longer alive.

“They’re in the place where they want to keep hope they’re not in there but then they’re also realizing there’s a good chance they are in there and they want them to come back to be able to fully grieve and have closure and not so much unknown,” he said. “It’s difficult – your heart breaks for the families. I just promised them we’d do the best we can for them.”

In addition to the Livingston County Sheriff’s Office, members of the Wayne County Sheriff’s Office, Springwater, Livonia and Lakeville Fire departments and Livonia Ambulance are involved in the search.

Dougherty estimated at least 50 people are involved in the search.

“...Between our partnerships with law enforcement, fire and EMS we’ve got a good team effort here,” said Dougherty. “I’m confident we’ll be able to bring them home.”