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No charges in canoe deaths

Florida agency officials release a report on the February incident.

03/16/05

By Marc Dadigan, Rome News-Tribune Staff Writer

Florida law enforcement investigators have decided not to file criminal charges in connection with the canoeing deaths of two Darlington School students during a camping trip last month.

The announcement came Tuesday with the release of a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission report detailing how a Feb. 26 canoe trip down the Suwannee River into the Gulf of Mexico ended tragically.

Clay McKemie, 15, of Rome, and Sean Wilkinson, 14, of Acworth, died after their canoe drifted from the rest of the eight-student and two-adult group as it grew dark and the weather turned turbulent.

The trip was led by Steve Hall, an English teacher at Darlington who runs an outdoor-adventure tour company, and Bryan Evans, also a school employee.

Investigators confirmed the weather had indeed caused rough seas and also stated that "it's expected" for watercraft to become separated while traveling on open water. The report stated the boys died from a combination of hypothermia and drowning.

Christina Hall, Hall's wife, said late Tuesday they would decline to comment until they have seen the report.

Dixie County, Fla., Sheriff Dewey Hatcher said there was nothing in the report that would lead him to file charges in the incident.

He did, however, advise boaters to make sure they are prepared and to be aware of changing weather patterns.

A few hours after the paddlers launched, the water became choppy and later the motor died on the cataraft that Hall was operating. Hall signaled all the boats to tie up at the disabled craft.

When student Leslie Beninato reached the boat after paddling back from an island, she described Sean and Clay's canoe as "almost a speck on the horizon," according to the report.

Another student, Adam Moody, estimated the two were almost a mile back when the canoe he and Matthew Payne were in reached the cataraft, the last to do so, the report stated.

After night fell, they could see Clay and Sean signaling with their flashlights, and Hall and Moody left the group in an attempt to retrieve them.

They paddled so furiously that Moody vomited, according to the report, but they did not reach them. Hall managed on his cell phone to call his wife, who in turn called the Coast Guard.

In the early morning hours the next day, Coast Guard helicopters rescued Hall, Moody and the main group attached to the disabled cataraft.

The bodies of Clay and Sean were found several miles offshore the next day, the report stated.

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