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Recovery efforts for man lost in Otter Creek

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The worst wait: Gary and Lester Jackson, the father and grandfather of Tyler Jackson, wait as rescue personnel clear brush on each side of the Markle Mill Dam after Tyler went into the water early Tuesday morning.

JOSEPH C. GARZA



The body of a Terre Haute man remained trapped in the churning waters of Otter Creek at Markle Mill Dam hours after after the man tried to swim in the rain-swollen waters early Tuesday.

Recovery efforts continued Tuesday evening after the man's body was seen in the water at about 5 p.m., but an incoming storm hampered that recovery attempt.

Tyler E. Jackson, 21, was swept over the dam after entering the water just a few yards south of the dam at about 6:35 a.m. The creek was filled to bank level with fast-flowing water fed by recent heavy rains.

Lt. Kent Hutchins, conservation officer with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, said several witnesses saw Jackson swept away soon after he entered the water from the western bank. Jackson was spotted below the dam, caught in the churning waters, but later disappeared under the water and did not resurface, Hutchins said.

Conservation Officer Max Winchell reported that witnesses said they tried to tell Jackson not to enter the creek. After he was swept over the dam, Winchell said, a friend tried to help Jackson from the bank by extending a tree branch but was unable to reach him. A person who entered the water to help Jackson was swept downstream by the rushing water as well, Winchell said.

No foul play is suspected, Winchell said, but alcohol consumption appears to be a factor in the incident. At 7 p.m. Tuesday, Winchell told the Tribune-Star that another recovery effort might be attempted before nightfall. If that was not successful, recovery would continue Wednesday morning.

After arriving at the scene Tuesday morning, rescue personnel conducted a search of the creek banks downstream from the dam, but Jackson was not located.

Shortly after 9 a.m., Hutchins said that the rescue operation had turned into a recovery effort, and it could be several days before Jackson's body surfaces so that it can be retrieved from the churning water at the base of the dam.

"We don't anticipate finding him today," Hutchins told media at the scene Tuesday morning. However, by late Tuesday afternoon, fire personnel had returned to the scene.

A rope system was planned for body retrieval from the water by the rescue team from Sugar Creek Fire Department, working with the DNR officers. Trees and brush growing along both banks of the creek were trimmed back to allow the rope system to be rigged across the creek above the "boil" churning along the dam. A rig for capturing the body as it rose to the surface was attached to the rope system, which was controlled from the creek bank.

Hutchins explained that in the case of this low-head dam across Otter Creek, the water that passes across the dam has tremendous force that traps objects in the hydraulic churn of the water. Two large logs bobbed like corks in the churning water as fire personnel watched for signs of Jackson. A body can be held underwater for several days before surfacing, and the recent rainfall that has swollen the creek makes the churn even more powerful.

“People need to realize the danger of low-head dams,” Hutchins said. “If we approach this dam with a boat, it will be sucked into the churn and capsized, and all the occupants will be drowned.”

The DNR experienced the loss of an officer in 1998 during a rescue training exercise at Williams Dam near Shoals in southern Indiana. A boat will only be sent into turbulent water for a rescue situation, Hutchins said, not for a body recovery, because of the risk to personnel in the boat.

The rainfall of recent days, approaching the 3-inch mark as of Tuesday afternoon, according to the National Weather Service in Indianapolis, has caused flooding in many low-lying areas, especially along creek banks. Hutchins said that motorists should be wary of water flowing across roadways, because the flow over the road has created its own low-head dam. If a car is washed off the road by floodwater, the car occupants may be able to get out of the vehicle, he explained, but they may be caught in the churn of water and be sucked under and drowned.

Many of Jackson’s friends and relatives arrived at the Mill Dam Park area Tuesday as the recovery operation continued. The park, which is owned by the county, does not have any swimming restrictions for the creek.

“You can still swim in public waters,” said Vigo County Park Superintendent Keith Ruble. “Any creek along a public park, people can swim there.”

The Markle Mill Dam park is a popular place for public swimming, Ruble said, but the public should always be cautious about entering the water. The water pool below the dam can be waist- to chest-high when the creek is at its normal flow level. But the flow over the dam can create “tremendous undertow” that is dangerous to swimmers.

There are signs posted to warn people not to climb onto the dam itself and to stay off the ruins and foundations of the long-gone gristmill constructed with the dam, Ruble said.

This is the first drowning at the dam site since the county has operated the public park, he said.

Hutchins confirmed that the drowning is the first reported in Vigo County this year.

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