

Crews resume search for County woman

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Source:
Bangor Daily News
Monday, 05/15/2006
Edition: all, Section: b, Page 1

PRESQUE ISLE - Though police, wardens and search crews were out this weekend conducting their biggest search to date, they were unable to find any trace of Tela Hart, a Presque Isle woman who has been missing since October.

Hart, 42, last was seen heading home on foot from a party on Lenfest Street. The local Police Department's bloodhound tracked Hart's steps to the Presque Isle Stream, just a block away, but since then police have been unable to find any clues as to where Hart may have gone.

She has not called home, though family members said she has never left for more than a few days without making contact, and there has been no activity on her credit cards.

Gathered in a room at the city's public safety building, which served as the command post for the search, family members said on Saturday that at this point they are looking for closure.

"We don't really know if she's dead," Timika Jones, Hart's niece, said. "In our minds, she's really just away somewhere."

"We hope they find her," Shannon Cole, another niece, said on Saturday. "If they don't, we hope they find some evidence of her or where she may be."

Unfortunately, officials said, that didn't happen.

Searchers combed about 50 miles of riverbanks along the Presque Isle Stream and Aroostook River - all the way from the confluence of the two waterways to the Canadian border - looking for signs of Hart.

Warden Kevin Adam, planning officer for the incident command team, said on Saturday that the search was going fine despite one searcher being taken to the hospital to be treated for a bee sting.

"If we don't find her today, the search will be scaled back," Adam said. "From my experience, these things are a waiting game. It's just hard to predict."

Detective Wayne Selfridge of the Presque Isle Police Department said on Saturday that crews were using boats, airboats, ATVs, planes and cadaver dogs in the search. Along with police and the Maine Warden Service, members of North Star Search and Rescue and the Maine Search and Rescue Dogs organization helped in the search.

Selfridge said this is the first search of this scale that crews have been able to conduct for Hart because of dangerously high water levels between October and now.

Right now, he said, water is flowing at about 3,000 cubic feet per second. But this spring it was at about 18,000 cubic feet per second, and in October, when Hart went missing, it was at about 30,000 cubic feet per second.

Once the ice let out, Selfridge said crews with North Star spent about 25 hours searching the marshy area at the confluence of the Presque Isle Stream and Aroostook River. The U.S. Border Patrol has done helicopter flybys. The Down East Emergency Medical Institute used aircraft-mounted digital imaging photography in an attempt to locate Hart. Crews are checking out objects of interest detected in the 350 images taken by the aircraft. Selfridge said police also have made specialized missing-person fliers for river users and posted them at access points along the two waterways.

The detective said this is not the last search crews will conduct, it's just the biggest so far.

"We have to look at this as if it was one of our own family. What we would want to have done for us, we're trying to do for them," he said.