

3 missing in fiery hot-air balloon crash

Robin Webb and Melanie Eversley, USA TODAY 5:39 a.m. EDT May 11, 2014

Search and rescue workers continued to scour a rural area in central Virginia on Saturday after a hot-air balloon carrying three people caught fire and crashed Friday night.

The incident happened shortly before 8 p.m. ET Friday evening in Caroline County, Va., after three hot-air balloons took off from Meadow Event Park and headed northeast to a pre-approved landing zone about two miles away from the park, Virginia State Police spokeswoman Corrine Gellar said at a press conference late Friday. Two of the balloons landed safely, but as the third balloon attempted to land, witnesses said it struck a power line and burst into flames near the Caroline Pines subdivision.

No wreckage has been found yet. A pilot and two passengers were believed to be aboard, Gellar said.

Based on witness accounts, including information from the other two balloon pilots at the scene, the basket -- or gondola -- of the doomed balloon caught fire and two explosions occurred, the second of which severed the gondola from the balloon, Gellar said.

Carrie Hager-Bradley said she saw the balloon in flames on her way home from the grocery store and heard people yelling, according to WWBT TV.

"They were just screaming for anybody to help them," the station quoted her as saying. "Help me, help me, sweet Jesus, help. I'm going to die. Oh my God, I'm going to die," Hager-Bradley said she heard one person screaming.

Because the balloon and gondola separated during the blaze, with the balloon ascending and the gondola descending, authorities were searching for two crash sites, Gellar said.

According to witnesses, it appeared the pilot tried to take emergency measures, and the two passengers may have jumped from the fiery gondola, she said.

"We will continue through the night," Gellar said. "We've got additional resources coming in until we find the wreckage."

The balloon was part of the Mid-Atlantic Balloon Festival, an event at the Meadow Event Park in Caroline County, Va. The incident took place several miles away from the park, and Virginia State Police and the Federal Aviation Administration are investigating, said Greg Hicks, the park's vice president of communications.

Gellar said grid searches were being conducted, but were hampered by darkness, dense forest and rough terrain. She also said police "have an idea (of the identities of the missing) and have been reaching out to family members."

The Meadow Event Park is known for being the birthplace of thoroughbred race horse Secretariat.

The Mid-Atlantic Balloon Festival was scheduled to take place at the park Saturday and Sunday. According to the park's website, a "Friday Flights Happy Hour" kicked off roughly two hours before the crash.

Balloon teams from across the country were expected to take part in the weekend event, but a statement posted Friday evening on the festival's [website](#) announced it had been canceled due to the accident.

Contributing: The Associated Press