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Man dies during Organ hike

By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES -- A 77-year-old Las Cruces man died, likely of a heart attack or stroke, while hiking with a senior group in the Organ Mountains on Thursday morning, state police said.

The man's identity wasn't immediately available because notification of relatives was pending, said Capt. Rich Libicer of the New Mexico State Police.

"This gentlemen, who had no apparent medical conditions any of his companions seemed to know about, just collapsed on the trail," he said. "They did attempt CPR; they did pretty much everything they could do."

Libicer said the man was not injured in a hiking-related fall.

The hiker was near the top of the Baylor Pass National Recreation Trail when he collapsed around 11:30 a.m.

The site of the incident is about four miles from the trailhead on the western side of the mountains, the most heavily used access point for the popular trail.

City of Las Cruces spokesman Udell Vigil said the man was with a recreational group from the city's Munson Senior Center that calls itself the Munson Center Hikers. He said it has existed for about two years.

Vigil said about eight to 10 people were present when the man collapsed.

"There are experienced staff members that

accompany the hikers, and, when the gentleman took ill, they did administer CPR, and a volunteer with the group used a cell phone to call 911," he said.

Libicer said the man had plenty of experience hiking, especially along the Baylor Canyon trail.

"It's an unfortunate incident, but it sounds by all accounts that this was something he loved to do," he said.

Libicer said the man likely died soon after the first call for help.

By late afternoon, the body of the hiker had yet to be recovered.

Around 12:30 p.m. about a dozen emergency response vehicles, mostly from volunteer fire departments in Do-a Ana County, could be seen at the trailhead.

The six-mile trail runs from near Baylor Canyon Road, over the Organ Mountains to Aguirre Spring Recreation Area on the eastern side. The path starts with a slight incline but becomes much more rugged.

The trail is on U.S. Bureau of Land Management acreage. An official with that agency could not be reached for comment Thursday.

At least two other hiker deaths have occurred in recent years in the Organ Mountains, but as the result of accidents. In January 2006, New Mexico State University music teacher Melba Halamicek, 65, died after a fall on Dripping Springs trail, south of Baylor Canyon. In April 2005, 21-year-old Richard Odom of Las Cruces also died after falling from a cliff in the Dripping Springs area.

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