

Authorities rule out alcohol as cause of fatal hayride accident

BY TIM ROWDEN
Of the Post-Dispatch

Investigators say a 21-year-old at the wheel of a fatal hayride accident in High Ridge was not intoxicated at the time of the crash.

Lt. Mark Tulgetske of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department says preliminary toxicology tests indicate the driver was not under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident.

He said investigators still were awaiting the results of a drug screening to determine whether narcotics or other stimulants might have played a roll.

"The driver has been cleared for alcohol; we're still awaiting the results of the drug screening," Tulgetske said.

An accident reconstruction team has not determined what caused the fatal accident, but authorities said Monday they were concerned about "wear and tear" they found on the aging tractor used to pull the haywagon.

Tulgetske said investigators had found wear on the brake pads and some other maintenance issues relating to the 1965 Ford Model 3000 tractor that pulled the wagon loaded with Girl Scouts and crashed down a wooded hillside at the ranch Oct. 15.

Rachel McManemy, 12, of St. Louis, was killed, and 11 other girls and nine adults were injured.

Don and Susie Johnson have operated the 78-acre Rocking J Ranch in northern Jefferson County for more than 12 years. Susie Johnson said the equipment at the ranch was well maintained and in good repair.

"There's no way that they're going to find a problem with that tractor," Johnson said. "That tractor was very well maintained, it's been very well taken care of."

Investigators also are considering the number of people who were riding on the wagon, trail conditions, the steepness of the slope and what, if any, mistakes may have been made by the driver.

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