

## Avalanche awareness

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Keith Stebbings, Wallowa Avalanche Center Director, teaches and practices avalanche testing in Wallowa County's backcountry. - Submitted photo

Avalanche safety is getting increased attention in Wallowa County thanks to the Wallowa Avalanche Center.

"The need has been obvious to local backcountry people for years," said Roger Averbek, longtime Wallowa County backcountry skier, guide, avalanche safety trainer and Wallowa Avalanche Center board member.

Backcountry skiing and avalanche awareness are not new to the county, but the newly formed avalanche center brings a focus to the training and awareness necessary for backcountry recreators.

"We developed the website to bring avalanche dangers to the forefront and make the public become more knowledgeable," Keith Stebbings, center director, said. "They do occur in our backyard."

The center's website, launched in September, features a weekly summary of snow conditions every Friday morning. The summary informs the public of the hazards out there, Stebbings

said.

"Pick up as much knowledge and awareness about safety," he said. "You can glean an amazing amount of stuff by spending some time on the website's weekly summaries."

A valuable tool on the website is a medium for field observers to post conditions they have experienced. These field observers are knowledgeable about the backcountry and are out skiing the terrain on a regular basis. Field observers must have a Level 2 avalanche certification, and there are other requirements as well.

"The observers network is on a volunteer basis, and it assists us by sending in observation conditions," Stebbings said.

The weekly summaries from the observers network is valuable especially for visitors who have a tendency to go to a place, dig snow pits and make a prediction, Averbek said. "The key to avalanche safety is understanding the history of the snowpack. It is a complicated subject unless you are out there on a regular basis."

The public forum feature on the website is open to the general public to share what they come across in the backcountry. The forum addresses several regions of the Wallowa Mountains and a variety of topics concerning snow conditions, road conditions and training.

Updated weather forecasts are also available and provide a variety of readings throughout the West.

"People need to be savvy about the hazards they are getting into," Stebbings said. "If people are concerned about avalanches, they need to take courses by us or others to 'bone up' on what is avalanche terrain or how to safely travel through it."

The weekly summaries, observer posts and public forum are to be informative on current conditions, track winter history and keep records to inform the public.

"They are not avalanche forecasts. We wouldn't pretend to know that," Averbek said.



Most visitors and local recreationists hike the Wallowa Mountain trails in the summer. "Some don't understand when they hike our trails in the summer that we have avalanches in the winter," Stebbings said. "These avalanches can occur even before you get to cliff- hidden dangers."

Averbek added, "Backcountry travel is very different between summer and winter. Our trails are not built with avalanches in mind."

Averbek said very few hiking trails fall into avalanche danger areas until high elevations, but "many hiking trails go through avalanche paths, tracks or go through run-out zones. We have narrow canyons and steep-sided drainages like Hurricane Creek.

"When you are in the valley bottoms there is an objective hazard of natural avalanches. Human-triggered avalanches do not occur often. They happen when people go into avalanche terrain, but an avalanche is possible on a small microsite at any elevation."

Besides checking conditions and knowing the terrain, both Stebbings and Averbek highly recommend avalanche training before experiencing the backcountry in winter.

Keith Stebbings, Wallowa Avalanche Center director, and Julian Pridmore-Brown, avalanche center board member and webmaster, are working to encourage backcountry awareness and safety. - Submitted photo

Now a retired electrical engineer, Stebbings uses his engineering and physics background to study advanced snow science. Stebbings served as an observer and intern with the Utah Avalanche Center in Salt Lake City before re-locating to Wallowa County.

Stebbing still works under well-known, longtime snow researchers under a research cooperative and the Utah Avalanche Center. He is currently studying temperature gradience and near-surface faceting.

“Near-surface faceting are weaknesses at the surface of snow. When new snow lands on top there is a development of a weak crystal layer. For this research we use special sensors on the upper two inches of the snow,” Stebbings said.

Growing up in New Hampshire, Stebbings spent many years alpine and backcountry skiing in the White Mountains. He began working as a ski instructor as a college student and continued teaching for many years. The White Mountain Avalanche Center is run by the U.S. Forest Service and is the only one of its kind in the eastern region of the U.S.

Another project Stebbings is working on in conjunction with the Utah Avalanche Center is helping to determine the avalanche climate the Wallowas fall into.

The three climates in the West are Maritime, which include the Cascade and Sierra; Continental, which the Colorado Rocky Mountains fall into; and the Intercontinental/transitional climate, which encompasses Idaho and Western Montana. This climate is likely the most similar to Northeast Oregon’s mountains.

Stebbing rode his bike through Wallowa County in 2007 to explore the area. In 2008 he purchased a home in Joseph. Last year was his first winter in Northeast Oregon. He said he has more interest in winter backcountry adventures than summer and spends all of his volunteer time with the avalanche center and search and rescue.

Averbeck came to Wallowa County to work as a seasonal employee with the Forest Service in the mid-1980s. In 1989 he joined the Eagle Cap Nordic Ski Club to build a hut along Sheep Ridge. The hut is still in use.

From 1993 to 2007 Averbeck ran Wing Ridge Ski Tours as a backcountry outfitter and guide. In 1995 he started bringing in outside experts from Utah to teach avalanche safety. Eventually he began teaching avalanche education, efforts, which are an ongoing work in conjunction with the Wallowa County Search and Rescue, he said.

Averbeck’s avalanche preparedness teaching began with Blue Mountain Community College and continued when he ran Wing Ridge Ski Tours. Now he teaches courses on Mount Hood, but as a board member and longtime Wallowa County resident, he is still tied to this area and its backcountry concerns.

Connelly Brown, another backcountry guide, took the opportunity to offer courses, Averbeck said, and has brought in experts from Idaho and Wyoming. Besides classroom training like the free course offered in January in conjunction with the Extreme Sled Dog Race activities, a field session will be offered in February.

Stebbing and Averbeck agree that having the right equipment, besides training and experience, are necessary for the backcountry. Stebbings encourages backcountry skiers to have an appropriate backpack outfitted with a shovel, probe and a beacon.

“Have a beacon or transceiver, from any manufacturer, and know how to use it,” Stebbings said. “Use the one you have and practice with it. A transceiver needs a human operator so you can find the person quickly.”

When venturing into the backcountry, there are several ingredients for an avalanche. Stebbings lists those as steep slopes, weak layers in the snowpack and a trigger. A trigger is defined as stress or load on the weak layer, which can be a person, a snowmobile or an explosive charge.

“Snow hates rapid change,” Stebbings said. Natural triggers can include rapid warming, heavy snow or rainfall, and wind loading snow onto another area.

Averbeck said adverse conditions can also include when the freezing level goes up and an old snowpack with new snow on top. “Don’t go out in big rain on snowstorms,” he said.

The premier raffle prize at Thursday’s Wallowa Avalanche Center fundraiser held at the OK Theatre in Enterprise is a backpack equipped with a shovel, beacon and probe, essential tools for back country skiing, Stebbings said. Proceeds from the event will purchase education materials and support free avalanche courses.



Close Window