

Alaska Avalanche Information Center (AAIC) 2015-16 Season Summary

Alaska experienced another unseasonably warm winter with heightened avalanche activity across many parts of the state in late November and again at the New Year. Impressive glide activity began in February and continued to affect many of the coastal mountains through the end of the season. March and April kept our forecasters busy with storm and spring thaw activity.

Unfortunately six avalanche fatalities were not prevented this winter. The last three occurred in areas that are commonly used by motorized recreationalists and not serviced by an avalanche forecast center. AAIC is the statewide network of practitioners creating and improving avalanche information and educational opportunity.

AAIC supports six community avalanche centers across the state. Expanded outreach includes partnerships with municipalities, land managers, local newspapers, public radio, Alaska Department of Public Safety, snowmachine clubs, and universities. Our educators taught more than 50 community awareness classes as well as AIARE Level 1 & 2 courses for a total of 66 courses and counting.

Statewide AAIC 2015-16 Outreach Stats:

Published Forecasts: 290 Website Hits: 295,000

Education Programs: 66 individuals/students served through Education Programs: 5,108

ANCHORAGE (AAC): Submitted by Mat Brunton
The Anchorage Avalanche Center continues to evolve. In October a group of representatives from the Chugach National Forest Avalanche Center, Hatcher Pass Avalanche Center and the public met to discuss potential options for supporting and growing this center. In the meantime, the center continued its fourth season of providing regular backcountry avalanche information and education programs for Chugach State Park and residents of the greater Anchorage area.

AAC provided 34 advisories (at least once a week from mid December through April, with additional advisories issued as warranted by conditions), 65+ observations, backcountry preparedness and avalanche awareness clinics in the greater Anchorage area, and free “Know Before You Go” avalanche education for at least 1,000 middle and high school students in the Anchorage and Matanuska-Susitna Borough School Districts.



CORDOVA: Submitted by Hoots Witsoe



Our season began with hope for a colder winter than last year. However that hope changed to indifference by the New Year as the freezing line rose and left us with no snow below 1000 feet. Ample snow fell in the upper mountains and typical avalanche cycles occurred. The lack of snow in lower elevations, however, limited backcountry use and avalanche exposure. The lack of snow also kept any avalanche activity from reaching the highway. Prevailing warm temperatures brought spring shed early.

EASTERN ALASKA RANGE (EARAC): Submitted by James Smith

The Eastern Alaska Range Avalanche Center's first year was busy and productive. Early season storms (September to November) followed by over three months of relative drought, wind events, and warmer than normal temperatures produced widespread PWLs throughout the area. These were then buried by successive storms in mid to late March, which resulted in an active snowpack with widespread natural and human triggered avalanche hazards.



While EARAC does not yet provide forecasting services, we worked to develop our observer network with great success using both social media and website platforms. Facebook page 'Likes' are up 93% from March 2015 and we've had a Facebook Reach of 80,521 in the last year.

During the Arctic Man Ski and Sno-Go Classic in April, EARAC worked with AAIC forecasters to provide an avalanche forecast for five days during the event. EARAC volunteers participated in the rescue, and subsequent accident investigation of two fatal avalanche accidents in April.

EARAC hosted 16 educational classes ranging from awareness to Level 2, and reached over 300 students.

HAINES (HAIC): Submitted by Erik Stevens



This season started off strong, if not a little late, with 1-2m of heavy snowfall above 2000ft the first half of November. This set up most of our ski terrain with good coverage and a stable base, which is just what we like to see. The top layers of very loose, dry powder (which made for great skiing for a week or so) became a curse by late November.

Then the region was walloped by a Pineapple Express with 100mph south winds, 30-60cm of very wet snow followed by heavy rain up to mountain top level, and temperatures that rose 30° F in 24 hours. In advance of this storm we coordinated with AAIC's forecasting director, and other forecasters around the state. It was agreed the conditions could reach into the Extreme category for avalanche danger. We issued the Extreme rating the evening of Nov. 19th, lasting through the 21st. We produced a special press release that went out on the airwaves to warn of unusually high avalanche danger. The storm hit hard, closing the Klondike highway almost immediately due to avalanche. Reports came in all weekend of people hearing large avalanches coming down the mountains nearby. After the storm had passed we could see that nearly every path had slid, several of them to size 4. One very large slide covered nearly 5,000 vertical feet and tossed trees into Chilkat Lake (this area has several private cabin lots that sit in the runouts of large avalanche chutes). Over the next several days, members of the public commented to us that they appreciated hearing our warnings over the radio ahead of time.

That November Pineapple Express was the beginning of a persistent warm regime. Snow levels remained near 2000ft for most of the winter. The season became remarkable for not having a single strong outbreak of arctic air (defined as temperatures below 0°F in town). There was little in the way of skiing below treeline, so riders shifted their focus to the high terrain of the Chilkat pass.

The rest of the season played out as pretty standard. A couple of surface hoar events caused some significant avalanche trouble from February-March. We had 7 close calls reported to us, plus three burials. One slide at the Chilkat pass in April led to a fatality – the fifth in five years. Since it occurred across the border in British Columbia, Avalanche Canada is producing a report on this accident.

HAIC produced 45 advisories this season. We taught 15 free community avalanche courses in Haines and Skagway, and contributed to education efforts and forecasting at the Arctic Man ski and snowmachine race near Fairbanks. Our website hits continue to increase, and our Facebook page has been hugely popular with about 19,000 post views. We are building partnerships with local stakeholders: skiing, guiding, and mining operations. Funding

continues to increase each year, as does backcountry use, and sense of community.

HATCHER PASS (HPAC): Submitted by Allie Barker

Hatcher Pass Avalanche Center had an eventful season despite three unfortunate avalanche fatalities, a skier, a snowmachiner, and a snowshoer. HPAC provided avalanche advisories every Saturday, November through April, and more as warranted by weather conditions and accidents. There was a significant increase in website users this season, ranging from 1000-3000 hits per day.



The CNFAIC extended their observation platform, making HPAC public and professional observations visible on both HPAC and CNFAIC's websites. This partnership resulted in an increased number of public observations, as well as improving communication between HPAC, AK State Parks, AK Avalanche School, AK Pacific University, CNFAIC, and AK DOT professionals.

HPAC provided a free rescue workshop with over 80 participants in conjunction with the CNFAIC, AK Avalanche School, and local groups, thanks to a grant from the Department of Public Safety/AAIC.

Hatcher Pass received just about all its snow in November and March, with little in between- giving pause to ripen our famous square powder. November's significant avalanche cycle resulted in an avalanche crossing and closing the road for over a week. The old timers had to scratch their heads trying to remember the last time they lowered the avalanche gate, likely around the time of the lace up telemark boot, the Elan sno-go and Tom Murphy caretaking the Independence Mine.

This avalanche path is near the "Road Run" a popular high school winter recreation area. The same path ran in March, stopping nearly 10 feet from the road and adjacent to a recently used campfire site. (See photo.)

HPAC involvement was integral in the avalanche accident search for Liam Walsh (who is still missing), avalanche accident investigations, interviews with avalanche fatality victims, AAA accident write-ups, and collaboration with just about every associated agency within 100 miles. As a result of the accidents, community support has skyrocketed, assisting HPAC in raising over \$8000 for "Are You Beeping" signs for next season.



Over 180 people filled the ski chalet for an outstanding fundraiser and cabin fever reliever including "bluegrass-beer-bunny boots-boogying" all to help further the mission of the avalanche center. With a successful fundraiser, and sold out raffle, our little grassroots center is growing. Overall, the support, encouragement, collaboration, and involvement of many avalanche professionals and community members made this a remarkable season for HPAC.

VALDEZ (VAC): Submitted by Sarah Carter

Thompson Pass received 505" snow with 57" water equivalent in the course of 22 storm events. The town of Valdez received 178" snow with 40" water equivalent.

Our region experienced six widespread avalanche cycles related to storm snow avalanches that posed HIGH danger to backcountry travelers. Diverse user numbers continue to increase (listed in order): motorized, motorized hybrid with ski/snowboard/kite, touring ski/snowboard, mechanized ski/snowboard, and kite ski/board. March and April had many close calls with human triggered storm slab avalanches; some over surface hoar, with some stepping down to deeper weaknesses or glacier ice. A few individuals were captured, pulled their balloon-pack and successfully came to rest on or near the surface with minor injury.



Our membership has grown to 140 individuals, businesses, and community partners supporting the forecast and education programs. Beginning in October, 145 forecasts were published. An average of 300 people view the forecast each day with almost 50,000 views this season. Peak days during March and April saw over 800 visits. Our instructors taught several awareness classes in our schools and community including the annual Beacons & Eggs and Tailgate Mountains skills programs.

This is the fourth year the City of Valdez has funded the Valdez Avalanche Center. Private sector businesses and individual member donations have grown the center from a solely volunteer effort to paying seven forecasters, observers, and educators for their hard work.

Photos:

1. Impressive shooting crack on Peak 3 (NW aspect, ~3700', 12/13/15): a screaming red flag of avalanche danger. Photo: Mat Brunton
2. Three Mile Copper River Highway path ran naturally below the snowline March 21, 2016. Photo: Hoots Witsoe
3. Snowmachine triggered fatal avalanche in the Hoodoo Mountains, Eastern Alaska Range April 3, 2016 Photo: Conrad Chapman
4. Snowmachine triggered fatal avalanche, Courage Mountain, Eastern Alaska Range April 12, 2016 Photo: Conrad Chapman
5. February glide cracks near Haines Photo: Erik Stevens
6. Deep slab over surface hoar near Haines Photo: Erik Stevens
7. March wet slab on Marmot Mountain's SE face running to within 10' of the road. This was the same path that crossed and closed the road in November. Photo: Jed Workman
8. Nov 14, 2015 - Skier unknowingly triggering an avalanche on Marmot Mountain. Public use continues to increase and push the limits. Photo: Jed Workman
9. March 5, 2016 - Snowmachine triggered surface hoar above MP 30 Thompson Pass Photo: Morgan Gantz