

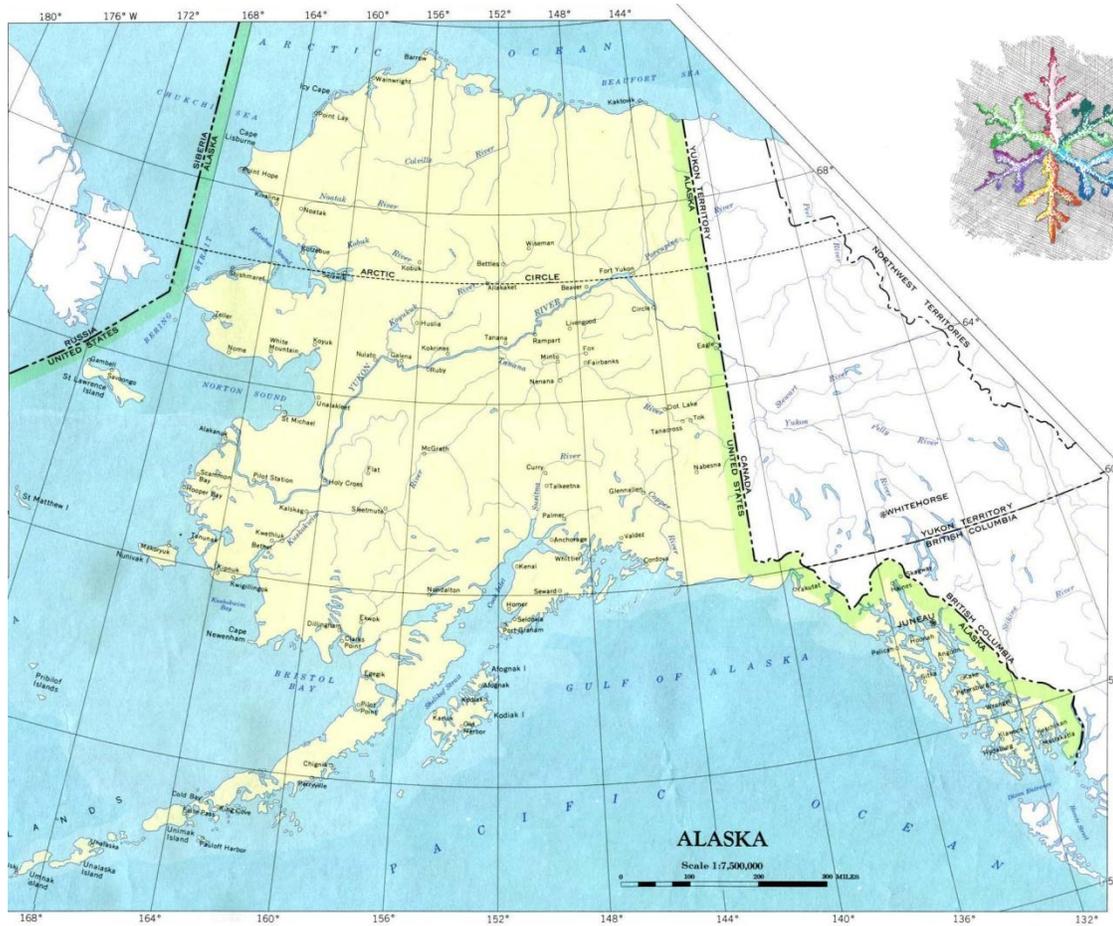


**Alaska Avalanche
Information Center, Inc.**

November 3, 2016

Alaska Snow Safety Summit

*Building a unified network of snow safety services for
Alaska*



Report prepared by:

Debra McGhan, AAIC Executive Director
907-982-0332; dmcghan@alaskasnow.org

Addressing Snow Safety in Alaska

KEY PARTICIPANTS

US Senator Lisa Murkowski, Greg Kaplan; State Representative Shelley Hughes; Anchorage Assemblyman John Weddleton; Moderator Christopher Constant; AAIC President and Board of Directors Pete Carter, Hatcher Pass Director Jed Workman, Cordova Director Hoots Witsoe, Education Director Sarah Carter, Instructor Mike Buck, Valdez Director Kevin Salys, Valdez Intern Kyle Sobek, Fairbanks Intern Conrad Chapman, Chugach National Forest Service Wendy Wagner, Graham Predeger, Aleph Johnston-Bloom, Alex McLain and Jesse Fisk; Alaska Avalanche School, Director Melis Coady; American Avalanche Association Representative Dave Hendrickson, Aleph Johnston-Bloom; Alaska State Troopers, Sgt. Steve Adams, Malia Miller; National Weather Service, Louise Fode; Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Cliff Larson; Karl Edwards, Division of Homeland Security; Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Wynn Menneffee; Arctic Valley Ski Patrol, Andy Sullivan, Chugach Powder Guides, Heli Ski US Representative Henry Munter...

HISTORY

This year marked the ninth annual Snow Safety Summit held in Alaska. The event started back in 2007 as a way to bring together snow safety professionals and community partners and policy makers in an effort to build a unified snow safety network of services for the state of Alaska. Although Alaska Statue 18.76.010 mandates the state provide avalanche forecasting and education services, there are no funds and no one in the legislature with the ability to get the necessary funds or agency to take this on. The Alaska Avalanche Information Center, a not-for-profit organization, stepped forward in 2014 to take on this challenge.

The state of Alaska is typically blanketed under snow for more than six months every year. Vast, mountainous regions crisscross the more than 570,000 miles of terrain which attracts residents and visitors from around the globe who live, work, travel and recreate in avalanche prone regions. The reason this matters is because this state is also ranked number one per capita in the nation for avalanche related injuries and fatalities. The US Government provides support for the Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center in Girdwood, but that only serves a small portion of the total state population. Without any state government supported avalanche forecast information centers or a unified system for addressing avalanche problems, the state is left with no winter safety program to serve the general public. This summit, organized and hosted the past three years by AAIC, is designed to help address gaps and bring together critical resources for a grass-roots solution to benefit the general public. The first summit was held October 2007 at Kincaid Park in Anchorage and facilitated and hosted by the North America Outdoor Institute. This annual event has been held at the BP Energy Center in Anchorage since 2012.

DISCUSSION

The 2016 summit was attended by more than 50 participants who represented a wide-range of agencies and companies from the Alaska State Legislature to individuals who have been touched by the devastating impacts of avalanches.

This year's Keynote Speaker featured **Billie Sundgren Tewalt**, the mother of **Claire Sundgren**, a young mother of two little boys who was killed in an avalanche on April 3rd, 2016 in the

Summit Lake Region of Alaska the day before Arctic Man was set to begin. Tewalt's heartfelt address touched everyone in attendance with a message of sincere sadness, yet hope, support and encouragement to continue the path we are on to ensure Alaska ultimately has a solid snow safety network of information and services.

The Summit was honored to have **US Senator Lisa Murkowski** provide the welcome address for the second year delivered by **Greg Kaplan**. Senator Murkowski expressed her welcome, appreciation, and support for all those in attendance and encouraged the summit participants' continued efforts. As an avid outdoorswoman and alpine skier herself, she recognizes the value and importance of the work being done by the volunteers and non-profit organizations, as well as the snow safety professionals, to keep Alaskans safe. She expressed strong support for the work of the summit members, and the commitment toward a one and five year plan. She expressed hope that the collaborations between involved agencies and organizations continues toward increasing avalanche awareness and safety across the state. She pledged her continued help and support through her work as the Chairman of the Energy and Resources Committee, to provide grant opportunities for avalanche public safety.

Other speakers who addressed the group with reports of progress made toward achieving last year's identified goals included:

Wendy Wagner – CNFAIC – Wagner stated that as the director of the Chugach National Avalanche Information Center (CNFAIC) her agency embraced collaboration by partnering with the Alaska Avalanche Information Center and the Alaska Avalanche School to provide community education programs in Hatcher Pass, Turnagain Pass and at Arctic Man. Participating AAIC centers included Eastern Alaska, Hatcher Pass, Haines, and Valdez.

Sarah Carter – AAIC – Carter stated that the network of AAIC information centers also embraced collaboration by participating in the programs mentioned by Wendy Wagner, as well as constructing a website platform that ensures all agencies and organizations are linked and included to make it easy for the general public to find and obtain information that will help them stay safe while traveling in the mountains all across Alaska. She stated that the goal of the AAIC is to bring education opportunities to communities that would not otherwise be served. She introduced each of the center directors in attendance and provided them the opportunity to share their achievements, goals and future objectives toward the statewide effort.

Steve 'Hoots' Witsoe - Cordova

- Building a more diversified program from the Backcountry Safety courses taught last year through the Alaska Dept. of Public Safety because this is an isolated community affected by the impacts of a warming global climate, while still living under the very real threat of avalanches. The Forecast Center continues to plug forward and is working with the Cordova Emergency Response System.

Conrad Chapman, Mark Lockwood - Eastern Alaska

- The newest member of the AAIC network of information centers. This center is just getting off the ground (formed in the spring of 2015) providing education and observation only information for the general public and is quickly growing as a result of a number of recent avalanche fatalities. Search and Rescue support.
- **Haines** – Installed a new weather station in order to gather and share more relevant information to help those that live, travel and work in the Haines and Skagway regions of

Alaska. Also partnering with the Southeast Avalanche Information Center to provide training across all of Southeast Alaska. Data shared with NWS, Heli operators, and mining industry operators is helping to raise avalanche awareness for Southeast Alaska.

Jed Workman, Allie Barker

- Hatcher Pass - 2015-2016 was a challenging season with three fatalities. This center is purchasing “Are You Beeping” signs and beacon check devices in an effort to raise awareness in the Hatcher Pass area of Alaska. In addition, they have formed a steering committee with 8 people to formulate plans and direction to improve services. They are partnering and collaborating with the CNFAIC to provide forecasting assistance, and are working to secure snowmachine(s) in order to work more closely with motorized users.

Kevin Salys, Kyle Sobek

- Valdez – Is now funding a seasonal full-time forecaster (Kevin Salys) and providing a daily forecast for the Thompson Pass region. In addition, under an agreement with the City of Valdez, the AAIC is gathering daily weather data. The center is also conducting scientific research and gathering information on different ways the public uses backcountry terrain to better meet the needs of the state.

Sgt. Steven Adams – The Alaska Dept. of Public Safety – Alaska State Troopers – Providing Search and Rescue resources as well as \$25,000 support through an annual backcountry safety education program to teach awareness and preparedness skills for traveling in all backcountry terrain as well as avalanche prone regions. This program reaches communities across Alaska from Fairbanks to Ketchikan, Valdez to Anchorage with curriculum for elementary, middle, high school and adults. This program is expected to continue in the future.

Cliff Larson – The Alaska Dept. of Natural Resources – Land Management – Larson advised the non-profit organizations to collaborate with state and federal agencies for permitting of weather station and education programs on public lands. He stated that data collected needs to be consolidated and put into a retrievable format for all resource and forecasting entities to share. This is about forming strategic partnerships that benefit multiple agencies.

Louise Fode – The National Weather Service – NOAA- Fode stated that the NWS has the capability to provide site specific and content specific forecasts. They are also happy to provide detailed weather info for avalanche forecasters. We want to hear from the public backcountry users and avalanche professionals. A number of collaborative projects are in the works with the NWS for this upcoming season and well into the future.

Henry Munter – Chugach Powder Guides – Heli-Ski representative – Member Heli Ski US. Munter said that the Heli Ski Industry and Heli ski outfits take ownership of the fact that they promote risky backcountry behavior in skiing, but try to do it as responsibly as possible. They promote sharing of information as to mistakes made and how to mitigate them for future activities. Munter said the Heli ski industry as a body is working hard to have a culture where they come together in a safe space to have fights, share data, information and talk openly about mistakes and still be friends at the end of it all. Munter said they have an open house policy with other professionals who are welcome to attend but the group also reserves the right to ask anyone to leave that is not contributing to the greater good of the effort. He said they contribute to the community through fundraisers by donating prizes and even held a dunk tank fundraiser that contributed approximately \$1,300 for community safety projects.

Munter said what he, as a representative of the Heli-Ski Industry, will do to collaborate and contribute in the future of avalanche safety in Alaska is continue working toward changing the culture of safety. “I am passionate about this idea that we can change our attitude and social problems about avalanches with the right message. [At CPG]...we work very hard on how we balance the dangers of what we do with the quality experience that people want, and make it happen in a safe way that people come home.”

The goal is to give people an experience they can live over and over, and over...

Melis Coady – Alaska Avalanche School Director. Coady stated the Avalanche School is celebrating 40 years of avalanche education service in Alaska. They have reached tens of thousands through their Know Before You Go program and this year will further expand services. They regularly collaborate with the Chugach National Avalanche Information Center and the AAIC - Hatcher Pass Center. They are committed to providing exceptional experience-based avalanche safety education to all users of the mountain environment.

Dave Hendrickson – Trail Maintenance Hatcher Pass and member of the American Avalanche Association. Hendrickson is a long-time pioneer for avalanche education in Alaska and a strong advocate for the Snow Summit Committee. He has worked in the field of snow safety in Alaska for more than 65 years and currently serves on the board of the American Avalanche Association helping to provide resources for a recreational and professional education track recently released by the AAA. He contributes to the statewide effort through his work grooming trails for users in Hatcher Pass and collaborating with the AAIC, CNFAIC and the AAS.

John Weddleton, Anchorage Assembly member and avid hiker and backcountry user. Weddleton expressed his concern for the lack of snow forecasting services available for Anchorage area trails in the Chugach Mountains east of Anchorage. He stated there are a significant number of users in these backcountry areas because of their close proximity to Anchorage/Eagle River population centers. He stated that he was not sure what could be done on this issue but did want to raise awareness about the problem for Summit participants to consider.

Ross St. John (Public Representative) for the motorized user and interested in bringing education to other riders. “I remember when I was first riding if you could make it to the top of Rookie Hill in Turnagain Pass, you had a pretty bad ass sled. Now with the advancement of machines that can far out ride the rider, we have people getting into places they don’t belong. I really want to take to my community some knowledge and education so that is my interest in being part of this summit.”

This discussion does not include all speakers at the Summit. You can view more of the conversations at www.AlaskaSnow.org.

During the 2015 Summit the following goals were identified to define success for one year:

- Establish an advisory committee in the Anchorage region working to provide avalanche observations and education opportunities
- Produce regular public service announcements airing on the radio and television
- A professionally contracted message airing on the National Weather Service

- A clearly defined hub for information sharing (identify the umbrella agency or hub for information distribution)

In 2016 – The following has been achieved toward the identified first year goals:

- The AAIC and the CNFAIC are working collaboratively to provide an observation platform for the Anchorage, Eagle River, Chugach Hillside trails. The goal is to eventually grow to support a forecasting center in the Anchorage area.
- The AAIC is providing weekly Snow and Trail reports on 9 radio stations in the Anchorage and Mat-Su Valley. These reports include snow forecasting information, safety tips, education opportunities and more.
- The AlaskaSnow.org website is linked with the National Weather Service and providing streaming data from three weather stations (Thompson Pass, Eastern Range and Haines.) Visitors to AlaskaSnow.org can also directly link with the National Weather Service
- AAIC, through the AlaskaSnow.org website, is working diligently to be the hub for information sharing along with the national Mtn. Hub website.

Five year success was identified as:

- Statewide information sharing system that is easy for all agencies, organizations, companies and individuals to access and provide quality observation/forecast information. Similar to the system called InfoEX in Canada
- Central point of access for the public to reach all avalanche centers and education opportunities
- Curriculum available in schools that is clear and quantifiable
- Regular use of drones and thermal imaging for avalanche risk assessment and search and rescue missions
- A definite shift in culture that embraces avalanche safety education, information sharing and carrying appropriate safety gear

Working in small groups, participants of the 2016 summit identified the top three things in the following areas:

1. What does Alaska need most for a comprehensive snow safety program to be successful?
 - Sustainable funding
 - Network of shared information that is easily accessible to the public
 - Qualified instructors to train Alaskans
2. What can you or your company do to support or contribute to snow safety in Alaska?
 - Collaborate
 - Share information and resources
 - Donate time
 - What should we all do to help promote snow safety? Share information

CONCLUSION

In addressing the challenge of providing snow safety information, forecasting, education and emergency response, all of us at AAIC recognize the critical need to include the thoughts and ideas of all stakeholders. Because it is not easy to get all those interested in snow safety together with enough time to address the challenges, it is our objective to continue to facilitate discussions and work sessions throughout the year that will ultimately result in valuable information and

feedback that produces quantifiable results. Our goal is to ensure that every mountain traveler has quick, easy access to quality information and education opportunities that can help save their lives and reduce the number of avalanche related incidents.

How can you help make sure Alaska has a solid network of avalanche information centers that you can locate easily, get dependable information from and learn about opportunities to get educated? You can join the movement. Become a member of your local avalanche center, use the website to get snow forecast or observation information, or post a personal observation. Learn more at www.alaskasnow.org.

Get more information on the summit at: <http://alaskasnowsafetyconference.webs.com/index.htm>

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS WE ARE STRIVING TO ACHIEVE

1. Continue to gather input and feedback from all stakeholders
2. Define the problems with clear step-by-step solutions for addressing the problems
3. Provide an information sharing forum
4. Provide a single point of entry for information available to the general public
5. Host a full-day workshop to allow ample time for gathering suggestions, concerns and ideas for ensuring the general public in Alaska has easy access to snow forecast and education information

SPECIAL THANKS

All of us at the AAIC would like to express our sincere thank you to Christopher Constant for moderating the 2016 Snow Summit.

We also want to thank BP for use of the Energy Center; Alyeska Pipeline Service Company for covering critical expenses; and Black Diamond Equipment for donation of a pro avalanche transceiver, shovel and probe as our door prizes.

Thank you to everyone that attended and provided thoughts and insight and suggestions on this important topic. Together we are working hard to ensure that every Alaskan and visitor to our state has quick and easy access to critical, timely professional information regarding snow conditions and education opportunities throughout our state.



Greg Kaplan, Welcome address from US Senator Lisa Murkowski



Billie Sundgren Tewalt, [Keynote Speaker](#)



Sgt. Steve Adams, Alaska State Troopers

Link to [Photos](#) & [Videos](#)