

ACCIDENT REPORT – APOLLO CREEK – MARCH 10, 2007

OVERVIEW

On Saturday, March 10, at 3pm a 34 year old male snowmobiler triggered and was buried by an avalanche at the head of Apollo Creek in the Baker Creek Drainage approximately 15 miles west-northwest of Ketchum, ID. This information is based on interviews with two of the victim's partners, as well as two riders that were with group prior to the accident. The Sawtooth NF Avalanche Center investigated the slide the day after the accident.

EVENTS

The group of riders from Richfield, ID, rode into the Baker Creek drainage on Saturday morning. They had not checked the advisory but heard second hand that the avalanche danger was rated as Moderate. They triggered a slide earlier in the day in Norton Creek, an adjacent drainage to the accident site. The avalanche was estimated to be 300 ft wide and occurred on a steep, northerly facing slope. At this point, two riders that had joined the Richfield group chose to turn around (see addendum below) and head for less steep terrain.

At around 3 pm, the victim was highmarking a steep, northeasterly facing slope at approximately 9500 feet. The rider triggered the slope on his descent and attempted to outrun the slide. In the process he apparently collided with a tree and was separated from his sled. The other members of the group reportedly were in the runout and started their sleds to get out of the way. When the avalanche stopped the victim was buried, but was found within a few minutes by the female partner with whom I spoke. She got close to the victim with her beacon and was able to hear him screaming. He was buried next to his sled with his head about two feet deep and the rest of his body buried deeper. The rescuer was using a BCA Tracker beacon and had done some practicing in her backyard.

The victim was complaining of severe back pain and another member of the group, who is reported to be an EMT, went out for help. He returned to the scene with a radio and oxygen while search and rescue mobilized. Life Flight along with a Sun Valley Heli Ski guide reached the victim between 6 and 6:30 pm and he was airlifted to Boise.

SNOWPACK AND WEATHER

The avalanche occurred right next to a visible slide that had been triggered by snowmobilers a week earlier. This adjacent path was also the scene of an avalanche fatality that occurred February 28, 2004. Another avalanche on the same ridgeline ¼ mile to the south claimed the life of a snowmobiler on April 1, 2005. Several other close calls have happened in the vicinity.

The avalanche was approximately 250 feet wide, averaged 2 feet deep, and ran 400 feet vertically. The slope angle in the starting zone was 37-40 degrees and the slope faced north-northeast. The debris was estimated to be 8-10 feet deep. The classification of the avalanche is SS-D2.5-O-AMu.

The avalanche fractured on faceted snow that formed during a month-long dry spell January. The weak layer was buried by an estimated 4-5" SWE during February and at the time of the accident was buried approximately 60-70cm deep. Only a few inches of recent snow had fallen, and the last significant loading was approximately eight days prior to the accident.

Stability tests in the avalanche crown produced hard results with Q1 shears or no failures. Tests in an adjacent, undisturbed starting zone yielded similar results. On the day of the accident, the avalanche danger on steep, northerly facing slopes was estimated to be MODERATE by the Sawtooth National Forest Avalanche Center (see attached advisory).

On the same day, another avalanche was triggered by a snowmobiler in similar terrain approximately 10 miles to the northwest. The rider was partially buried and able to extricate himself.