

Special Avalanche Warning for Coast and Columbia Mountains of BC

Structurally weak snowpack means backcountry travellers must leave wide safety margins.

March 20, 2009 Revelstoke, BC: The Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC) is issuing a special public avalanche warning for the South Coast Mountains from north of Pemberton to Squamish and Hope, the Columbia Mountains from Prince George to the US border and the North Rockies area from Mackenzie and Hudson Hope to the Kakwa provincial park. This warning goes into effect on Friday March 20 and extends through the weekend. The areas of concern are the uncontrolled backcountry mountain areas of the South Coast, Kootenay Boundary, South Columbia, North Columbia and the North Rockies.

Recent snow and rain has once again brought the snowpack to a tipping point with the potential for snowmobilers and backcountry skiers to trigger avalanches during their activities. Where and when an avalanche will occur is difficult to predict and this makes it hard for recreational backcountry users to plan their activities. "Under conditions like these people using the backcountry must leave an extra margin of safety. This means selecting the terrain you use according to the current avalanche danger for your region," says John Kelly, Operations Manager for the Canadian Avalanche Centre.

Backcountry users need to be alerted to a high number of recent close calls in several areas of the province. A common theme is travellers letting their guard down. "I know it seems like there is a special warning every weekend", continues Kelly, "it's just that kind of year, second in a row, with a bad snowpack. So we have to keep the reminders pumping out. The tricky avalanche conditions are not going away."

The Canadian Avalanche Centre has noted a disturbing trend in snowmobile fatalities with 13 of 19 avalanche deaths in Western Canada coming from the snowmobile user group. While avalanche deaths among backcountry skiers are on a declining trend, snowmobile fatalities are sharply up over the past two years. "We have to look ahead and prevent the next avalanche accident," says Kelly. "So I have to say rather urgently that snowmobilers need to do two things before heading into avalanche terrain. Train yourself to properly master avalanche rescue gear – that means an avalanche transceiver, collapsible probe and shovel. Second, read the avalanche bulletin and adjust your objective to fit with the primary avalanche concerns of the day."

The CAC and partner public avalanche bulletins are your best source of information for snowpack conditions and backcountry travel advice. Check www.avalanche.ca/bulletins for up-to-date information and the avalanche hazard rating for your area *before* making backcountry travel plans.

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