

Saving lives through snowmobiler avalanche education

By Doug Chabot

The Avalanche Review (37.3)

The forecast area of the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center (GNFAC) includes Cooke City, a snowmobiler Mecca. The terrain is big, open, accessible, within view of Yellowstone National Park and deadly. Cooke City's first snowmobile avalanche fatality occurred in 1992 and since then there have been 19 snowmobiler fatalities making it the deadliest real estate in USFS land for motorized recreationists. The GNFAC's education efforts started in the early 90s by teaching riders that rescue gear was essential. As sleds got more powerful and multiple avalanche fatalities became the norm, we hammered the message to ride one-at-a-time. In 1999 I created a 1-hour avalanche awareness lecture for snowmobilers using cutting edge technology, PowerPoint. This was distributed on CDs to every avalanche center and dozens of snowmobile clubs across the west, but sledders kept dying in avalanches.

On December 18, 2015. A party of 5 was riding outside Cooke City during a High danger when they triggered a slide that caught 3, buried 2 and killed 1. We interviewed the 4 survivors and were immediately impressed with their avalanche acumen. They had taken avalanche classes, had the latest gear including airbags. They visited Cooke City frequently, one coming for 15 years, almost a local. They knew the avalanche danger was High and were riding low-angled slopes. When the avalanche occurred they sprang into action and quickly dug out their friend, but it was too late. It appeared to be bad luck as they had done everything correct, including having the proper gear, getting the forecast, going one-at-a-time and knowing how to perform a rescue.

Boy, was I misled. What they told me was not what happened.

Just before saying goodbye to them I discovered they had a Go Pro camera that captured the entire accident. Could I get a copy? Sure, they said. What was on that camera forever changed my thinking regarding avalanche accidents. The interview with the 4 survivors did not even slightly match the unbiased footage I watched. They were all on the slope together and far up the avalanche path. After the slide occurred it took 17 minutes before they began a beacon search for their friend. Seventeen minutes! And then they used hands and a shovel blade to dig, too frenzied to even snap on the handle. It was eye-opening and I left knowing that our education efforts had to change. If I had not seen the footage on the Go Pro camera I would still believe that this tragedy was simply a matter of bad luck, which it was not.

The next year we implemented an aggressive education program with the help of Cooke City businesses and Montana State Parks. Every Friday evening from Thanksgiving through mid-March, the Friends of the Avalanche Center hire snowmobiler instructors to lecture for an hour on current avalanche conditions and rescue protocols. On Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. they set up a portable BCA Beacon Park near a warming hut and teach people how to use a beacon and do a rescue. There is no sign-up or waivers. It is a free clinic to get people thinking about avalanches. Since implementation in November 2016 there have been no fatalities near Cooke City. We are changing a mind-set by highlighting avalanche danger, the specifics of avalanche terrain and how a proper rescue unfolds. GNFAC cannot take all the credit for zero fatalities during these 2 years. There were many close calls and we cannot

predict what will happen this winter. What is evident is that the community is behind our efforts and the attitude and conversation around avalanches is changing for the better.

Last winter there were 2 snowmobiler fatalities from 2 separate incidents in the Centennial Mountains of Idaho. These mountains are next to our forecast area near West Yellowstone, where in both instances we had issued an avalanche warning. One rider had no rescue gear and the other was in a terrain trap. These accidents occurred in an avalanche forecast no-mans-land. GNFAAC, the Sawtooth Avalanche Center, the Bridger-Teton Avalanche Center and the Utah Avalanche Center are working together to educate riders outside our forecast area. An avalanche specialist from each center (Mark Staples, Scott Savage, Chris McCollister and me) met at the Klim Winter Kick-Off in Rigby, ID to garner community support and business interest. A long-time snowmobile guide and educator for our Friends group joined in, and since he lives nearby the avalanche centers will contract him to teach awareness classes. There is a lot of work to be done and education is the first step. Although the Centennial Mountains are outside our forecast area, its snowpack is remarkably similar to West Yellowstone. The GNFAAC is adding a page to our website to give folks headed into the Centennial Mountains a one-stop-shop of weather, snowpack and rider observations. We hope our low-cost solution of education and information will seep into the riding community, much like it did in Cooke City, and save lives.