

Get Wild: Why should you report an avalanche?

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Debris from a skier-triggered avalanche is pictured Sunday, March 20, 2022, in the vicinity of Mount Goyot near Breckenridge. The slide occurred in large part due to a weak snow layer that is present in a large amount of Summit County's snowpack.

Charles Pitman/Courtesy photo

On numerous occasions I have written that Summit County Rescue Group would like any witnessed avalanche to be reported, even if there were no injuries. But it may not be evident just why we want those reports called in.

Avalanche notifications are one of the few to Summit County Rescue Group that result in immediate action (another being a swift water call). If a slide is reported to dispatch with no amplifying information as to whether anyone was either buried or injured (that is, the reporting party simply does not know), the on-call mission coordinator has to assume the worst and numerous agencies will be notified. Urgency is of utmost importance since survival from a burial is very time critical. Although survivals of someone fully buried are rare, all avalanches are treated as though any burial can be a potential life saved.

One of the first notifications will be for a Flight for Life helicopter overflight to assess for tracks in and out of the slide, whether any personal items are seen on the avalanche debris field (e.g., skis, clothing) or to look for someone frantically searching, digging or waving.

Concurrent with the Flights notification, a Colorado Rapid Avalanche Deployment team may be placed on standby. During the winter these are generally from one of the county's ski areas. Outside of ski season they will be qualified Summit County Rescue Group members. A avalanche deployment team consists of a snow technician, dog handler and avalanche search dog. Of course, a helicopter may or may not be available due to numerous factors.

Depending on the initial Flights crew flyover assessment, an avalanche deployment team may be flown (or they will have to drive) to the vicinity of the avalanche. On occasion, depending on the size of the slide, more than one dog team may be deployed, taking them away from potential emergent work at their respective ski areas.

Meanwhile, the Summit County Sheriff's Office's Special Operations Division will have been notified and Summit County Rescue



But it doesn't end there. Depending on the slide location many other agencies may be notified, including the US Forest Service, Colorado Avalanche Information Center, Wilderness Paramedics, Colorado Department of Transportation (slide location dependent), the Colorado State Patrol if road closures are considered appropriate (e.g., anticipating a large rescuer response for an avalanche on Loveland Pass), or potentially a property owner depending on the avalanche location.

If the slide is in close proximity to another county, or it is particularly large, Summit County Rescue Group may request assistance from neighboring county search and rescue teams to aid in a search and potential recovery operation.

All of these efforts include inherent risk for the responders. Whether driving on icy roads, flying in a helicopter, skiing through avalanche prone terrain, or working on an avalanche field with potential "hang fire," that is, unreleased snow above the original slide, there is risk that we want to minimize, or potentially avoid altogether.

Summit County Rescue Group is not involved in official accident reconstruction, or assessing how and why a slide occurred, those being tasks of other agencies. Our only goal is to determine whether anyone was caught, and if so to properly and safely extricate them.

Avalanches are one of the highest risk missions we respond to. By reporting a witnessed avalanche (the non-emergent number is 970-668-8600), almost all of the above can be avoided if there were no burials or injuries.



Charles Pitman



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