

## 2015 – AAA TAR REPORT INFORMATION FOR THE AAIC

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Beginning in 2008, the Alaska Avalanche Information Center (AAIC) serves as the statewide forum to support Alaskan avalanche information and education. On November 6, 2014 AAIC hosted the seventh annual statewide summit on Snow Safety.



2014 Snow Safety Summit

This event, facilitated by the Foraker Group, was attended by more than 75 individuals representing practitioners, business owners, politicians and government officials.

AAIC supports the continued growth of grassroots avalanche centers in Anchorage, Cordova, Haines, Hatcher Pass and Valdez to serve areas otherwise unserved with avalanche safety information and forecasting. Currently, AAIC is assisting the Eastern Alaska Range communities of Fairbanks and Delta to increase avalanche information in their region.

AAIC provided AIARE Level 1 & 2 courses along with backcountry safety training across the state from Anchorage to Juneau in partnership with the North America Outdoor Institute. This effort included collaborations with the Chugach National Forest Service in Hatcher Pass and at Alaska's annual temporary fourth largest city, Arctic Man. AAIC continues to respond to the wide range of Alaskan requests for assistance: individuals heading to a non-forecasted area, accident investigations, information for remote military operations, and research requests from across the nation and abroad.

1,250 people reached directly with Avalanche Information and safety messaging, approximately 500,000 reached through indirect messaging (radio, website, friends/family...etc.)

Total of all centers: Published forecasts: 248

Total of all centers: Website Hits: 1,043,559

Total of all centers: Education programs taught: 28

Total of all centers: Individuals served through education programs: 1,557

Total of all centers: Avalanche (close calls or fatalities) accidents dealt with – 4

Debra McGhan, Executive Director

Phil Hess, Vice President

**ANCHORAGE:** Anchorage reported 49” below the average 74.1” normal for seasonal snowfall, with only 25.1” of total snow this season. Last year (2013-14) Anchorage had 64.7” at this time: a mere 9.4” below normal. Warning from climate scientists indicate that while this season may not be the new norm, it may be a trend. Operations were hindered due to lack of snow and difficult backcountry travel conditions. We made our best efforts to provide updates and information on conditions as warranted by increasing or elevated avalanche danger. The Anchorage Avalanche Center is a completely volunteer effort yet the crew remained dedicated despite the dismal

winter conditions. The Anchorage Center hosted its first fundraising events in the fall and early winter. We provided a day of free avalanche education for the public thanks to Arctic Valley Ski Area, funded by the Alaska Department of Public Safety.

AAC Published 22 forecasts, 28 observations between December 2014 and April 2015. Website visits: Total: 911,242, Average of 399 unique visitors/day during seasonal operations, a total of 255 individuals served directly through education programs; five events No accidents reported One close call reported (photo at right)



Personnel: Mat Brunton, Avalanche Specialist, Program Director

**CORDOVA:** Produced 48 forecasts disseminated via email. Had 1887 web visits.

Fall so warm soon spring  
Followed then winter before  
Summer took over

Personnel: Steve 'Hoots' Witsoe, Avalanche Specialist, AAIC Director At Large

**HAINES:** Natural avalanche activity this winter favored a high proportion of small (D2-ish) slides, and a distinct lack of large slides with very little debris in lower runout zones.



Haines Training: Photo by Jeff Moskowitz

We can thank a lack of deep PWL's, warm temperatures favoring quick settling and bonding, and persistent maritime snowfall for the dearth of carnage. October through mid-April brought 48.04" of precipitation in the Haines valley (98% of normal). Temperatures were well above normal however. This was the result of numerous warm, moist pacific storms

and a lack of Arctic cold air outbreaks due to the unusually persistent ridging over the West Coast, which held snow levels near 2,000ft for most of the season (and thus, this will be known as the year without tree skiing). We were lucky to avoid any major alpine thaw/rain events like we saw in the winter of 2013/14. Also because of the warm and stormy weather, we saw fewer surface hoar events than usual (a notable exception being a troublesome late-March surface hoar layer that was responsible for many human-triggered slides and at least one partial burial).

Our effort produced 54 advisories over a period of 21 weeks. We taught 9 free

community avy awareness/education events in Haines, Skagway and Juneau reaching a total of 650 individuals. Our local Haines web traffic included 11,195 unique visitors.

Personnel: Erik Stevens, Avalanche Specialist, Haines Director  
Jeff Moskowitz, Avalanche Specialist, AAIC Secretary

**HATCHER PASS:** Low tide in Alaska affected Hatcher Pass with shallow coverage and lurking sharks throughout the season. While avalanche danger did not appear to have changed dramatically due to less snow, we have seen an increase in mid-winter rain events over the past few years that trigger more avalanche cycles.

What seems to be an emerging pattern is winter's new mood, kind of lazy to get started and staying out later. Warm temperatures persisted through what is normally a very cold autumn. November and April both averaged 29°F, with the rest of "winter" about the same. Bunny boots, which are classically Alaskan and mandatory issue in most winters, stayed in the shed this season.



Jeff Kase photo – Hatcher Pass

HP's typical persistent snowpack structure produced a large avalanche cycle in early March which highlighted the season. A number of close calls, (mostly snowmachines) in large avalanches resulted in no significant injuries. In response to the avalanche cycle and the increased number of backcountry users at Hatcher Pass, Hatcher Pass Avalanche Center (HPAC,) Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center, and the Alaska Avalanche School hosted a free rescue workshop with support through a Department of Public Safety grant. Collaboration and partnerships between all of the Alaska avalanche groups has increased our strength, improved our structure, and made us less likely to propagate a sudden collapse. HPAC's avalanche advisory user numbers continued to grow exponentially this season, due to the lack of snow elsewhere in the state, and a growing demand for avalanche information and education.

HPAC posted 31 forecasts with 57,238 visitors.

Personnel: Jed Workman, Avalanche Specialist, Director, AAIC Treasurer  
Allie Barker, Avalanche Specialist

**VALDEZ:** The Valdez Avalanche Center celebrated its 10th winter with five forecasters including a full time paid forecaster and three paid part time staff. The VAC produces a four-day forecast with the emphasis on the avalanche problem rather than a danger rating. Due to low snowfall, many Alaskan backcountry areas did not open to motorized

use this winter. Many of those users came to ride Thompson Pass doubling the motorized traffic over previous seasons. The low snowfall was only a valley perspective. Although Valdez and Thompson Pass had 16 feet below average snowfall, ten feet fell at sea level and over 30 feet was recorded at 2500' elevation and considerably more in the upper elevations.

The VAC produced 141 forecasts over 28 weeks, provided 14 free or contracted community backcountry safety courses, completed three major contracts for snow safety education and support, reaching a total of 652 individuals directly. The local Valdez website traffic had unique 48,894 visits.

January 1<sup>st</sup> a snowmobile group triggered a D2.5 avalanche that slid on early season facets. One rider was caught and buried without a beacon. He was luckily located due to his detached running board on the surface giving a surface clue that saved his life.



Personnel: Pete Carter, AAIC President  
Kevin Salys, Avalanche Specialist  
Sarah Carter, Education Director, Avalanche Specialist  
Monica Morin, Avalanche Specialist  
Sean Wisner, Valdez Snow Safety Coordinator  
Tony Mann, Avalanche Specialist  
Elise Tyrrell, Avalanche Specialist