

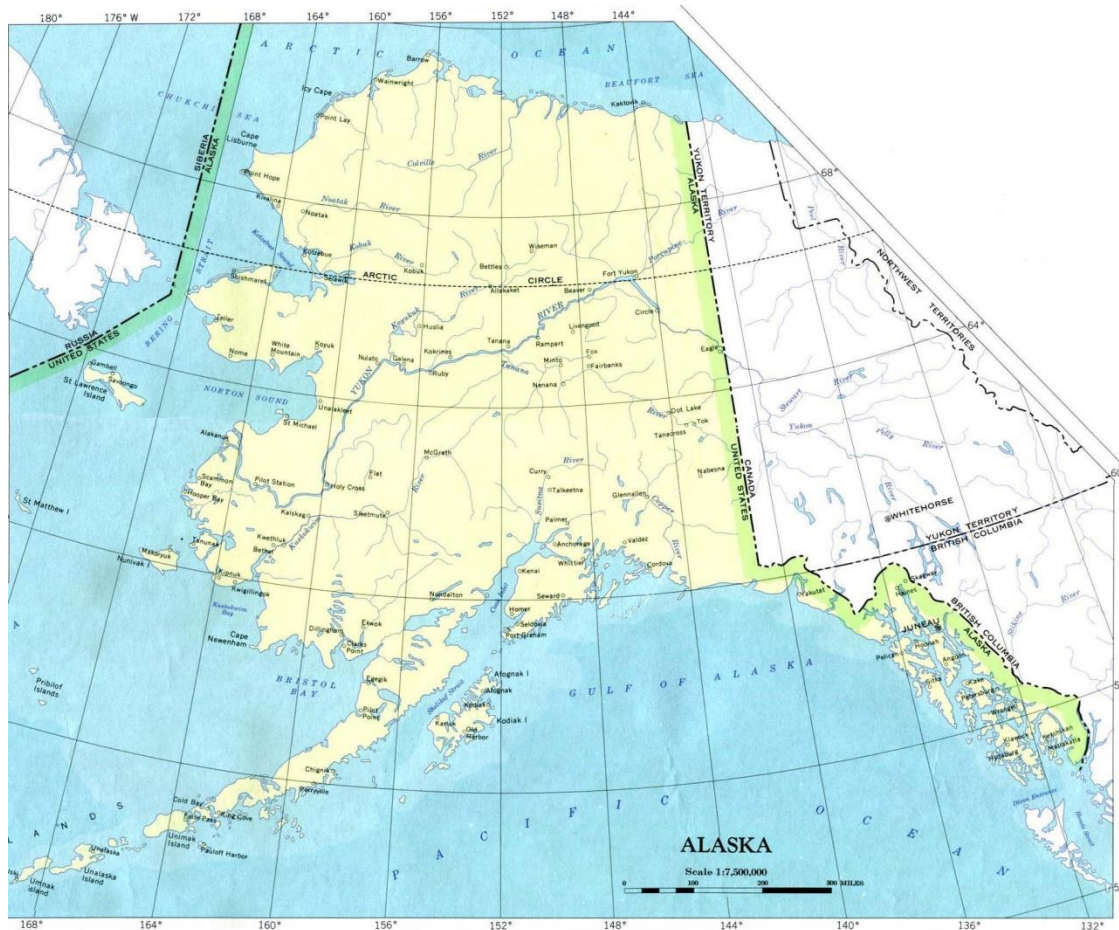


Alaska Avalanche Information Center, Inc.

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State of Snow Safety in Alaska

Building a unified network of safety



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Addressing Snow Safety in Alaska**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The State of Alaska is typically blanketed under snow for more than six months every year. Vast, mountainous regions crisscross the more than 570 thousand miles of terrain attracting residents and visitors from around the world who live, work, travel and recreate in avalanche prone regions. The state is also ranked number one per capita in the nation for avalanche related injuries and fatalities and yet does not have a government supported avalanche forecast information center or a unified system for addressing avalanche problems.

BACKGROUND

Alaska is a land of vast wilderness and towering mountain ranges with a population of approximately 750,000 residents (equal to the population of Austin, Texas.) Since the mid 1970's the state has consistently ranked number one in the nation for avalanche related injuries and deaths per capita despite this state having the smallest population and fewest people recreating. In 1960 the Alaska Rescue Group, renamed Alaska Mountain Rescue Group in 1980, was founded by a group of professional mountain rescue volunteers who have assisted in numerous avalanche related incidents over the years. In 1976 Doug Fesler and Jill Fredston, two of these avalanche professionals, founded the Alaska Avalanche School. In 1981 the school became part of the Alaska Avalanche Warning Center, later called the Alaska Mountain Safety Center. The center was launched following an exceptional avalanche season in 1979 that resulted in numerous fatalities. The center received financial support by the state until 2001 when the budget took a hit from falling oil prices.

Dave Hamre, who is currently employed by the Alaska Railroad, has been involved with snow safety for decades in Alaska. Hamre was part of the original effort to create the Alaska Avalanche Warning Center and says there was a lot of start-up pains suffered due to the bureaucracy and inflated budget.

“There were more than 10 state agencies involved and it was unwieldy trying to get anything accomplished. Plus it required a lot of money to get a seat at the table.” He believes the reason the avalanche warning center ultimately failed was because they were unable to clearly define the value they provided to the public. His suggestion to the group at this year's summit; Pay attention to the lessons from the past.

Hamre also believes that the Alaska Avalanche School, which has continued to grow and is now considered a prominent authority in Alaska avalanche education and awareness, is an important model because it is supported by professional snow safety instructors and citizens of the state.

In 2007, spearheaded by the North America Outdoor Institute, the first snow safety summit was held in Anchorage, Alaska to address the concerns over the lack of a broad-based, cohesive snow safety program for the state. This summit was held at Kincaid Park and included representatives from numerous state agencies including the Alaska State Troopers, Dept. of Transportation, State Parks and many snow safety professionals from the avalanche school, H2O Heli Guides, Alyeska Ski Resort and dozens of other independent snow safety instructors, forecasters and avalanche professionals. Despite this gathering, the state has continued to suffer from a lack of

collaborative efforts. These fragmented groups have continued to battle this challenge while struggling to secure necessary funding and grow their individual constituencies.

DISCUSSION

The 2014 summit was well attended by numerous agencies, organizations and individuals working to provide snow safety for the state of Alaska. Facilitated by Foraker Vice President Mike Walsh, the summit provided a platform for discussion on ways these individual groups may work together to build the collaborative and cohesive snow safety network needed to support the residents and visitors who live, work, travel and play in Alaska's avalanche terrain. During the summit, each individual was given three-minutes to provide their thoughts and concerns about this topic. This started with comments from Mike Walsh about the importance of building a sustainable effort that will endure the test of time.

According to Walsh, sustainable non-profit organizations focus on gathering the right people, the right leadership and embracing partnerships to leverage and share limited resources. He stressed the importance of identifying the common vision and theme that binds all of the agencies, organizations and professionals together around snow safety.

To begin the evening and identify available resources, the group was divided into teams and each team was given a scenario based on a real situation that has occurred in Alaska. It quickly became apparent that while the state is home to some amazing and talented individuals, there is also a serious lack of resources and the potential for addressing a large scale snow safety incident could quickly and easily be overwhelmed.

Dave Hamre said he thinks the success of the Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center (CNFAIC) in Girdwood is based on the fact they follow a national model that has defined standards, utilizes paid forecasters and has enough funding to produce a good product. Plus they have a 'Friends' group that helps to provide a substantial portion of the agencies funding. "It's pretty tough for the federal government to cut funding to an agency that has a solid constituency base supporting it. I think that model, which is based on other successful National Avalanche Centers, can be replicated (here in Alaska) but it's going to take time and a lot of grassroots efforts."

Mike Buck, with the State of Alaska Occupational Safety and Health Agency, agreed. Buck, like Hamre, is another long-time snow safety specialist in Alaska and has more than 20 years experience working, living and teaching in Alaska. He has traveled thousands of miles by snowmachine, operated a tour company and understands the challenges facing this industry. Today, in his current position, he is looking at the problem from the standpoint of protecting workers.

"Evolution and opportunity," Buck told the group in a video presentation. "That's what skiers, snowmachiners and avalanche professionals have been experiencing since the early, crazy days of (the World Extreme Skiing Championships) which started in Valdez in the mid 1980's. Today we still have a very independent minded approach here in Alaska. We pride ourselves on being cutting edge, high adventure, adrenaline rush professionals. But the risk tolerance is often elevated to unrealistic heights."

Buck believes that avalanche safety is poised for a fundamental change here in Alaska. He encouraged the group to work collaboratively in order to guide the process utilizing the best of the best this group has to offer for the overall good of the industry both in Alaska and across the US.

“This is right now a major evolutionary period that provides an opportunity to do the right thing and propel Alaska’s avalanche professionals to a higher level,” Buck said. “We must work together to make this happen.”

Buck believes that one of the key elements that could help change and propel this industry forward would be for all of the groups to come together and write a letter requesting the state change the land-use regulations for heli-skiing and other guided operations from ‘general use’ to permit required. “With a permit the operators would then be required to provide a safety and operations plan, insurance and ensure their workers and clients are cared for in appropriate ways to make it safer for everyone.”

That isn’t going to help the common recreation user from going out and getting themselves in trouble, but it could help set a standard that professional operators would adhere to and that would help to change the culture for how everyone travels in avalanche terrain.

DISSCUSION FROM ATTENDANTS

Jay Pullins, Special Assistant to the Governor for Emergency Management, attended the summit and thanked the volunteers and professionals for their work and perseverance in providing snow safety for the citizens of Alaska. “Those of us in the Governor’s office don’t often get the chance to see you and thank you for your services. I want you to know that we are all grateful for what you do and we want to do all we can to support your efforts.”

Skip Boomershine, Alaska State Safety Council and Iron Dog, We should pay attention to remembering we have a lot of valuable resources (in Alaska) that could potential help to promote snow safety. We should all work together to put pressure on the legislature to help do a better job funding this effort.

Erik Stevens, Haines AAIC, We should pay attention to all the information we generate in our careers and daily work. Now we need to bring all of that information together in one place to help each other and the general public.

Blaine Smith, Alaska State Parks and the Alaska Avalanche School, We need to define our problems (I’m still fuzzy on what those problems are. I hear information sharing, a single point of entry for the consumer...) I think we should list out these things and then come up with step by step goals. If we can do that I’d be more on board. When I joined the American Avalanche Association (AAA) many years ago I was looking to them as the umbrella organization to help. This group is now working to get standards in place, which might be belated but it’s coming. This will provide a common language for all of us. So let’s define the problems, make discreet steps to get to each goal and look to resources available now so we only invent things we absolutely have to.

Mark Kelly, Heli ski guide Haines and Valdez, I think the most important thing we should pay attention to is sharing information in a manner similar to Canada. We have a lot of folks

generating information including the Forest Service, forecast centers, heli guides, railroad, mountain guides... by sharing information it will help all of us work together to better enhance safety for everyone.

Colleen Kunanon, Alaska Department of Health and Occupational Safety, I think one thing we should all pay attention to is something Mike Buck mentioned and that is our risk tolerance. And not just for avalanches but something that is common to many industries. There are a lot of valuable resources within this group and together we can help raise awareness by working together to pool our resources to help people be fully aware of the risks that are out there. Our office can help by providing information on best practices to help people be safer in the field.

Mat Brunton, AAIC Anchorage Forecast Center – I think we should pay attention to keeping this in-sync with what the general public wants and needs. We need to define ways we can work together to provide straight forward, clear information for the public so we don't confuse them. I hope we can do this in a way that respects all parties involved. I can help by continuing to pour myself into getting out in the field to gather and share critical information.

Mike O – National Weather Service – We have a ton of weather expertise in our organization and appreciate the opportunity to work with all of these agencies to share our skills and resources.

Dave Schmin – Representing the Mechanized Ski Guide community. He believes that this group should pay attention to the standards by which any information sharing is based on. Good information is good but poor information can be misleading and dangerous. Building a network to share information is good as long as we have an agreed upon standard by which to do the sharing.

Wyn Menefee – Division of Mining – DNR, We need to know what we all do so we have a better understanding of what we can and cannot do. What information do we want to share and what is the best way to share that information. We need to focus on one or two things like creating a website for information sharing that is easy for people to update and for the public to understand and access. Or Education. What programs do we want to make known to the public.

Andy Kubic – Moved to Alaska from Utah and came looking for a way to volunteer and help with Alaska's effort. We should pay attention to what other states have done and done well and emulate that model rather than starting over. Check out the Utah Avalanche Center app.

Cody Herrick – Guide from Seward. I think we should pay attention to the fact that this is a vast state and there are a lot of really good people out there than want to help. Identify those people and include them in future discussions.

Dave Rhodes – Colorado transplant. I agree that we should pay attention to current systems that are working well like in Colorado. I want to be an ambassador for the Alaska effort.

Liz Repetto – CNFAIC. I think it's important to define who we are and what we do. We should develop focus groups that can look at the issues and come up with some potential solutions to share with the entire group.

Billy Finley – CNFAIC. I would say we need to look at the information gap for areas like the Anchorage front-range and Hatcher Pass. There is a need to provide information for these areas and by working in collaboration with the AAIC I think that can be done.

Skip Repetto – CNFAIC – We should utilize the history and knowledge that exists and help support communities who need information but don't have a reliable source.

Jed Workman – HPAC – I think we should all pay attention to the under educated public and reach out to the community to seek resources to help sustain our efforts to raise awareness.

Allie Barker – HPAC – We have a great model with the forest service avalanche center but they are serving US forest service lands. We need to have something more tangible on state lands. By collaborating with the CNFAIC and creating a transition from federal to state, we will be more successful. My hope is that this effort will enable us to run a sustainable center. We have partnered more with the CNFAIC and that has been awesome so I hope we can continue that collaboration.

Russell Sell – Owner, Ski AK – Our big concern is when people come to our store that are skiers, boarders, hikers... and they want to know what's going out in the mountains. What do I tell them? I think the message needs to come from the state level and be a singular source of information that is compiled from all of the agencies involved.

Phil Hess – AAIC Board – 1. I think we need to pay attention to the fact there is a tremendous potential for confusion by the public and donors and that is why a single source of information is critical. 2. Support AAIC to bring our expertise and experience to support small, grassroots centers that are working to fill this information gap.

Adam Smith – DNR – We have 60 million acres of land and 35 land managers who are working to review and approve operation and safety plans for groups like the Iron Dog, Arctic Man and others. We need to have an industry standard for what safety is so we can be consistent across the board. Our challenge is that we can set rules and regulations but we have no enforcement ability. We should also look at a second state statute Alaska Ski Safety Act (AS0545) I think we need legislation to help shape the message. I think once you have a strategic plan that is well thought out, it will help everyone and encourage agencies to get on board with funding support.

Heather Thamm – Alyeska ski patrol. I agree that this group should pay attention to coming up with a good plan and a good method for communicating with the public. I can also be a good ambassador for this new culture.

Sandra Fletcher – Alaska Dept. of Labor and workforce development. Our agency has been around since the 70's. I know this issue is about the culture and we can help steer that toward a safer way of doing things. Our agency has resources and we're willing to help support this effort.

Greg Matthieu – Alaska Dept. of Labor and workforce development. One of our biggest standards has to do with safety. That's what we do and we have the ability to provide training and help because our focus is on the safety of people from the employer and employee standpoint. Call us and we'll be happy to help.

Wendy Wagner – Director CNFAIC – We should pay attention to fosters and developing relationships. This is my fifth season and I too was very confused when I first came here because of the fractured sources of information. My goal is to continue taking steps to collaborate and work together with all of the agencies here.

Graham Predeger – CNFAIC – We are the only US center here in Alaska thanks to some seed money from Senator Stevens. This money helped start a grassroots center in our small corner of Alaska and think this is a good model we should all pay attention to. We are happy to collaborate and share our safety plans, job descriptions... I think it's important that others look at our history and see what we did right and learn from our mistakes and areas where we can improve. I agree that it's important that centers start in a regional area and then move out rather than try to start on a statewide effort and move in.

Greer Gehler – Senator Begich's office – Senator Begich is an advocate for more federal funding to support the Chugach Forest Avalanche Information Center in an effort to provide paid positions for forecasters and we will continue to support this effort.

Corey Aist – Alaska Search and Rescue Association. I work on the reactive side of this issue and it's an interesting relationship between the proactive and reactive. There are so many resources on the reactive side so how can we get resources to the proactive side? Coming together is a challenge but by bringing all of these groups under one umbrella and then finding a common objective that the umbrella agency can promote and support will help with the legislative side of this. If you have an umbrella agency that can bring those objectives together, develop a well thought out plan and then promote that plan, it will be easier to get legislative support. It's a tricky thing and getting harder all the time but it can be done.

Aleph Johnston-Bloom – Alaska Avalanche School and the American Avalanche Association. I really like that other places were mentioned because I think it's important to look at best practices across the country and emulate those models. By looking at what has worked in other places and being part of the larger community like the AAA and the Canadian Avalanche Center we'll have a roadmap for new start up centers. These agencies want to help start-up centers create a sustainable product that users can understand and the AAA can feel good about promoting. The AAA expects to have a listing criteria for new centers by the end of November and also working on a professional and recreational side for information. I hope that the Alaska Avalanche School can continue collaborating and helping other groups.

Andy Dietrick – American Avalanche Association and Alyeska Ski Resort. We pay attention to communication and work hard to provide assistance to the troopers when they need our help. We use the AAS for our professional development and try to support other education programs that need the resources available at Alyeska. Our goal is to continue to do that as much as possible.

Mat Murphy – Alaska DOT. We are also focused on communication because we need to share information to help learn everything we can and get the word out to the public. The key to our success is sharing pertinent information in a timely manner. We deal with a huge area of uncertainty so it's important we have as much information as possible to base our decisions. We will try and reach out even more in the future.

Jim Kennedy – Alyeska Ski Resort snow safety director. We are doing all we can to help but unfortunately our hands are tied and many of the decisions we are involved with are made by the lawyers. But we will continue to do as much as we are able under those constraints.

Pete Carter – AAIC – In Valdez we are at the end of the road and things are good. We have support from our local community and enough money to pay our educators and this year, our forecasters. We used our seed money to spread around the state to support other start up centers and for things like this summit and feel really good about what we are doing to support this effort. Our goal is to continue supporting this effort because we want to get it done.

SURVEY FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS – Information anonymous

What did you like best about the summit?

I really liked how everyone had an opportunity to speak. This was very valuable. And, I appreciated that the agenda was flexible to allow for everyone to speak.

It was a great opportunity to share concerns and ideas with professionals from areas we rarely see.

The concept of a state agency

Networking opportunities

Alaskans around the state across the discipline showed up. Politicians showed up. A shop owner showed up.

Hearing from individual attendees.

Gathering the snow safety professionals and hearing who and what folks do...

Suggestions for improvement?

Allotting time for a discussion after hearing everyone's comments. Possibly breaking into smaller groups to report on future visions, differences in visions and such. Also, professional atmosphere, it was unfortunate to hear the AAIC (Summit organizer) Board President publicly call his employer a "junk show".

I would like to see time allocated for breaking into working groups to discuss, refine, and debate. Often when everyone gets to say one thing, people don't get the time to really understand each other.

There was no flow or direction. Even your opening speaker in Mr Hamry didn't support the agenda you were pushing. It was confusing.

Get your technology/ media figured out beforehand. I was interested in what Mike Buck had to say but could not hear him for the life of me.

Mike Buck's talk needed sound. 2) Phone system needed testing. 3) Consider making it a daylong event with focused break out forums addressing specific tricky issues. 4) #6 in this survey needs expandable typing boxes.

Anytime there is a community decision on the table, I believe a "roundtable" or discussion type meetings have to be priority. It must be the educator in me. I believe the efforts of this last week's meeting were tremendous, but there are always room for improvements in all we do. I would suggest start the communications with asking questions and getting everyone's ideas for answers. Work with the group to create the purpose especially if we are looking at a large community outcome or result. The agenda seemed a bit reverse, but that isn't a bad thing, it just leads us away from community decision making. I heard loud and clear the purpose from Debra was getting a larger statewide "entity", but being first year attending, I also heard incredible professional feedback on other options and why not to move forward to the "state wide." No matter what decision was on the table last week at the meeting...it could have been about politics or education, it is so clear where the disconnect is in my eyes...the process. It is like one team leader is running up the hill on the trail saying, "come one come on, lets get to the top," while others in the group want to look at the weather, a few people in the back are just wanting to look at the map to be sure this is the best route, another person has taken a different route in the past and definitely believes there is a better way, while a few folks have hot spots or are hungry and need to take a break. Debra and company, if you are asking for my suggestion, it would be to present a question to the community...let go of the final product and ask the community and keep asking the community and then with a panel of experts from a diverse mix of professionals, listen to the feedback. The hardest job you have is the vulnerability of asking your question because we always risk not hearing what we want to hear. But I truly believe, and not being a snow expert myself, the answers are in that room and I believe by changing the process, and having more of a community wide discussion, not meeting or presentation, then you, me, we, they, will really hear what people know, what people think and what people want. Again, Debra, I sing your praises on your work this past week. Since this box is asking for suggestions, I am offering them. The summary of above is, I heard there are concerns and rather than stopping things because of concerns...and I heard there was some support, and rather than moving fast forward due to some supports, the work needs to continue...that room had many, many professional thoughts in there and I believe no decision is close until the people are asking the questions and providing the answers. Just like the group of hikers, the leader can't tell them the pace, the whole group needs to decide at the breakfast table, before even hitting the trails-"where are we wanting to go?" Thanks Again Debra for listening to suggestions, great work last week.

Did you learn anything new about the state of snow safety in Alaska?

I have been thinking a lot about this topic recently and I would say it provided additional food for thought and a better understanding of where different people and groups are coming from. I came away from the evening hearing different views regarding the need for a statewide avalanche center. I did not feel there was consensus among the group for a statewide center. Dave Hamre's talk stating the challenges from the past, when there was a statewide center, was appreciated. I did not come away with an understanding of how the statewide vision would be accomplished and the steps being proposed. I did come away feeling positive that there is a lot to be accomplished with entities already in place (AAIC and its affiliates, CNFAIC, etc) and working on that.

Yes, I learned that AK still seems pretty divided on the issue of a statewide network of avy info. The two themes I heard were some folks (mostly Anchorage and Girdwood-centric) wanted to concentrate on their bubble and share info very locally as that is where they get the most value. Some of the further-out entities see benefit in a state-wide network. I also learned that Pete Carter is very un-professional based on a few of his comments and personal discussions with him.

AAIC has successfully taken on the job of networking

I was pleasantly impressed with the diverse mix of experts that exist in a field that I have existed in as volunteer status and user for the past 13 years.

OTHER COMMENTS:

I feel the group attending the Summit should pay attention to fostering/growing local relationships with a central focus on quality. For example, how to provide the most quality information to the public with the resources available.

Networking practitioners for the good of themselves, the business and, most importantly, the end users.

When you say group, do you mean the attendees? I believe paying attention to all the voices. It is hard work, but before any change can occur, the work of listening and gathering input is necessary.

The CNFAIC can contribute time and energy toward growing our relationship and working with AAIC and its grassroots efforts to provide quality, nationally recognized, avalanche information to key areas in Alaska.

AAIC Valdez aims to be a well oiled machine ready for the merger/acquisition by whomever. In today's political climate, government isn't going to fund anything new that's not already built. Everyone in Alaska's snow safety effort can learn from the development of a grass-roots non-government collaborative model. Everyone can learn from AAIC's example of working together for the greater good. AAIC is synergy.

The F-CNFAIC are willing to be at the table and discuss answers to any question that is presented. Debra you gathered all the right people and have started dialogues, but we need to now listen and listen very carefully.

Thank you for the time and effort to put this event on!

1) Schedule next year's event as soon as possible. 2) Circulate the contact information of each participant. 3) Ask each participant who else should be included. 4) Ask for carefully thought out and clearly written descriptions of the problems facing the participants avalanche work.

There are still concerns of credibility and professionalism about some of the grassroot avalanche forecasters. This will need to get sorted out in order to make high quality avalanche products available for Alaskan public & in order to achieve the common professional standards in lower

48. Let's be respectful of all the community and continue to build on trust instead of behind the backs scheming.

Thanks again to AAIC and Debra for all your work!

CONCLUSION

In addressing the challenge of providing snow safety information, forecasting, education and emergency response, all of us at AAIC recognize the critical need to include the thoughts and ideas of all stakeholders. Because it is not easy to get all those interested in snow safety together with enough time to address the challenges, it is our objective to continue to facilitate discussions and work sessions throughout the year that will ultimately result in valuable information and feedback that produces results. Our goal is to ensure that every mountain traveler has easy access to quality information and education opportunities that can help save their lives and reduce the number of avalanche related incidents.

How can you help make sure Alaska has a solid network of avalanche forecast center that you can locate easily, get dependable information from and learn about opportunities to get educated? You can join the movement. Become a member of your local avalanche center, use the website to get forecast information, or post a personal observation. Learn more at www.alaskasnow.org.

Get more information on the summit at: <http://alaskasnowsafetyconference.webs.com/index.htm>

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to gather input and feedback from all stakeholders
2. Define the problems with clear step by step solutions for addressing the problems
3. Provide an Information sharing forum
4. Provide a single point of entry for information available to the general public
5. Host a full-day workshop to allow ample time for gathering suggestions, concerns and ideas for ensuring the general public in Alaska has easy access to snow forecast and education information

SPECIAL THANKS

All of us at the AAIC would like to express our sincere thank you to Mike Walsh with the Foraker Group for his help in facilitating this statewide summit.

We also extend special thanks to Dave Hamre, with the Alaska Railroad, for his Keynote Address

Thank you to Mike Buck for providing his comments through the video presentation. Again our apologies for the challenge in hearing the presentation. Remember you can still check it out at: <http://youtu.be/y9y-xF8Ay5g>

Thank you to BP for use of the Energy Center for this event. This service, provided free to Non-Profits in Alaska, made this event possible.

Thank you to everyone that attended and provided your thoughts and input on this important topic.

Together we can ensure that every Alaskan and visitor to our state has quick and easy access to critical, timely information on snow conditions and education opportunities throughout our state.

Lots of great suggestions were shared in this process and we look forward to taking these suggestions to heart and incorporating them in next year's summit.