

## Avalanche Incident near Mt Hood Meadows, OR

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**Date:** Sunday afternoon, ~1400 PST, 2/25/2007

**Location:** Hinterlands/Heather Woods, Clark Canyon, within Mt Hood Meadows Ski Area Boundary

**Elevation:** 5700 feet

**Aspect:** N-NE, 30° slope average (45° at steepest point where slide released)

**Victim(s):** 2 male skiers caught—1 partially buried, self rescue; 1 totally buried in small trees at base of short slope, dug out by two companions within ~10 minutes, victim age 56

**Avalanche:** SS-AS-R3-D1, post control, 2 ft x 75 ft slab traveled ~100 ft vertical

**Rescue:** Victim recovered by visual and auditory search within ~10 minutes

**Weather:** 26° F, overcast, light snow

### ***Preliminary incident narrative:***

Early Sunday afternoon a party of three skiers enjoying some Northwest powder approached a relatively small but steep rollover in mid-lower Clark Canyon in the Hinterlands/Heather Woods area. At the time of their approach, the weather was estimated to be light snow with temperatures in the mid 20's and light to moderate southwest winds along higher ridges. That morning the Mt Hood Meadows Ski Patrol reported 7 inches of new snow during the past 24 hours along with a water equivalent of .52 in (about 7-8% snow density—~70-80kg/m<sup>3</sup>), max/min temperatures of 31° F / 25° F, and moderate southwest winds. Apparently the top of the slope had been traversed by a snowboarder earlier in the day with no release. Also, except for some small pockets releasing up to 1 ft soft slabs, morning control work in that part of the Canyon had produced no significant results. In any case, Skier 1 proceeded down slope without incident, stopping at the bottom. Skier 2 then made three turns whereupon the slope released a two foot soft slab, catching Skier 2 and sweeping him toward some small trees at the base of the short slope. Skier 2 came to a stop in the seated position just uphill from a band of small trees with his head approximately two feet under the snow, facing down hill. At the time of the incident, Skier 3 was skiing to the left of Skier 2 and did not notice that the avalanche had occurred.

After the slide came to rest, Skier 1 was buried up to the waist but was subsequently able to dig himself out. Meanwhile Skier 2 was able to clear a small air space in front of his face as the slide was coming to rest. After coughing up some snow that had filled his mouth, he was able to breathe and began to shout—these shouts were heard by Skier 1 who was partially buried nearby. Shortly thereafter, Skier 2 found that by moving his arm he was able to punch a hole through to the snow surface. After uncovering himself, Skier 1, with help from Skier 3, used both voice and visual contact (he saw the fingers of Skier 2) to pinpoint, dig down to and uncover the head and shoulders of Skier 2 within about 10 minutes. Once his head and shoulders were uncovered, Skier 2 found that he was able to wiggle his way free from the debris. The incident avalanche path is roughly 75 feet across, and 100 plus feet long with some small trees at the bottom. Note that information in this report is approximate, because the party did not come forward until two days after the incident.

**Other information:** Skier 2 who was buried had a beacon and shovel. Skiers 1 and 3 had no rescue equipment other than skis and their hands. Skier 2 was able to free an arm after some time, and had his

fingers visible to Skier 1. Skier 1 and 3 were able to free their friend in around 10 minutes using their skis and hands. No injuries were reported.

A more complete report should be available at [www.nwac.us/accidents.htm](http://www.nwac.us/accidents.htm) as soon as more information becomes available.

## ***Ancillary Snowpack and Weather Information:***

### **NWAC Avalanche Forecasts:**

On Friday, February 23, the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center issued an avalanche watch for the Olympics, Mt Hood area and the Washington Cascades near and west of the crest in an effort to highlight the anticipated significant increase in the avalanche danger levels on Saturday. A special avalanche statement was also issued on both Friday and Saturday and, in cooperation with the National Weather Service, the duty forecaster issued a special Avalanche Section of the NWS Area Forecast Discussion (AFD) on both Friday and Saturday, also to help disseminate the expected danger increase to a wider audience. Unfortunately, the victim of a fatal avalanche the previous day near Crystal Mountain was not aware of the generally high danger. While the Avalanche Warning for the Mt Hood area and the remainder of the Washington Cascades and Olympics was dropped Sunday morning, the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, as indicated below the back country danger for Mt Hood was still listed as high above 6000 feet with a slight increase expected during the day. Although the incident site was within a developed ski area that had been controlled earlier that morning, this fortunately successful incident outcome still points out the need for even lift skiers to remain aware of the avalanche danger, especially if they normally venture into less heavily trafficked areas close to ski area boundaries. It also points out the need for those venturing into steeper avalanche prone terrain, within or outside ski areas, to always ski or ride with a partner, and carry beacons, probes and shovels (and know how to use them).

### **Detailed avalanche forecast issued on Sunday, February 25, 2007**

BACKCOUNTRY AVALANCHE FORECAST FOR THE OLYMPICS WASHINGTON CASCADES AND MT HOOD AREA  
NORTHWEST WEATHER AND AVALANCHE CENTER SEATTLE WASHINGTON  
845 AM PST SUN FEB 25 2007

NWAC Program administered by:  
USDA-Forest Service  
with cooperative funding and support from:  
Washington State Department of Transportation  
National Weather Service  
National Park Service  
Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission  
Pacific Northwest Ski Area Association  
Friends of the Avalanche Center  
and other private organizations.

This forecast applies to back country avalanche terrain below 7000 feet and does not apply to highways or operating ski areas.

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ZONE AVALANCHE FORECASTS

\* OLYMPICS, WASHINGTON CASCADDES NEAR AND WEST OF THE CREST-

High avalanche danger above 6000 feet and considerable below Sunday with little change in the danger on Sunday, with a slight decrease likely Sunday night. Further slowly decreasing danger Monday becoming considerable above 4 to 5000 feet and moderate below.

\* EAST SLOPES WASHINGTON CASCADES-

Considerable avalanche danger above 4 to 5000 feet and moderate below early Sunday, slightly decreasing Sunday night. Further slowly decreasing danger Monday becoming considerable above 5000 feet and moderate below.

\* MT HOOD AREA-

High avalanche danger above 6000 feet and considerable below Sunday with a slight increase in the danger through Sunday afternoon and evening. Slight decrease in danger likely Sunday night. Further slowly decreasing danger Monday becoming considerable above 4 to 5000 feet and moderate below.

SNOWPACK ANALYSIS

Most areas in the Olympics and Cascades near and west of the crest received 5 to 10 inches of new snow over the past 24 hours with greater amounts received near Crystal Mountain where up to 14 inches accumulated. The slopes east of the Cascade crest received about 4 to 8 inches. Most of the recent snow fell during the day Saturday with only light accumulations overnight and early Sunday with diminished winds. Strong winds and warmer temperatures and moderate to heavy snowfall early Saturday caused a significant increase in danger, especially in areas exposed to southerly winds. These conditions lead to a fatal avalanche accident on a slope in the Mt Rainier National Park accessed from the Crystal Mountain area Saturday afternoon. Details are still to be provided however preliminary information indicated that a skier triggered a 3 foot slab on a recently wind loaded WNW aspect at about 6700 feet. The victim was caught and carried a very long way down the slope and may have died as a result of trauma suffered in the slide.

The heavy snowfall accumulations of 1 to 3 feet received Monday and Tuesday settled and bonded substantially through the mid-week period with additional light amounts of low density snow accumulating with little wind over most areas.

Many areas along the Cascade crest have received the recent snowfall with light winds, such as near Snoqualmie and Stevens Passes and the Mt Baker area. In these areas, a slightly lower danger may exist as the upper snowpack consists of unconsolidated powder snow with little or no slab properties in the upper snowpack while also providing some great conditions. However, in areas exposed to the recent stronger south to southwest winds, such as the south faces of the volcanic peaks and the Crystal Mountain area a locally greater danger may exist. Triggered or natural slab releases remain likely above about 6000 feet with triggered slides probable below that, mainly on open northwest through northeast facing slopes that have been recently wind loaded. A similar snow structure exists along the Cascade east slopes, although lesser amounts of recent snowfall are producing a slightly lower danger.

DETAILED FORECASTS

SUNDAY, SUNDAY NIGHT

Light to occasionally moderate snow showers and slightly diminishing winds and cooler temperatures should lead to a slight decrease in danger. Recently formed wind slabs should begin to settle, especially at lower elevations. A locally greater danger may remain on or near the volcanic peaks where stronger winds and heavier snow showers may build deeper new unstable layers. Decreasing showers and winds overnight Sunday should allow for a slight decrease in the danger as recent wind slabs again begin to settle.

MONDAY, MONDAY NIGHT

Occasional light to moderate snow showers, cool and light winds. This should allow for an overall decrease in danger, albeit a slow decrease. Recently formed unstable layers should settle slowly with cold temperatures and this should maintain areas of unstable snow on many steep open slopes, especially at higher elevations and on open northwest through northeast facing slopes. Backcountry travelers should continue to use caution and avoid slopes of questionable stability.