

Mt Baker Snowshoer Accident—12 December 2003

Date: Avalanche occurred on the morning of 12/12/2003 (~ 1039-1100 AM PST), recoveries on the morning of 12/13/2003.

Location: Near Artist's Point switchback near the Mt Baker ski area

Who: 3 completely buried, 2 recovered alive (after ~24 hour burial), 1 fatality

State: WA

Activity: snowshoe

Preliminary Report:

The following information was obtained from Mt Baker ski area personnel. A party of 3 snowshoers (1 man, 2 women) departed for Artist's Point on Friday morning, 12 December 2003. Near the last switch back on the Artist Point Access Road at about 4900 feet, they were all buried by a natural or triggered soft slab avalanche. The slide released from a 30-35 degree, north aspect slope, with the fracture estimated at 18-24 inches. By the next (Saturday) morning the man was able make a hole in the snow with his hand and began yelling for help. A passing party of skiers heard him, dug him out, and returned him to the ski area. A rescue party returned to the site and probers found the first woman, who had perished. A prober then accidentally stepped into the air pocket of the second woman who was miraculously alive. The man and the woman each survived about 24 hours or more of burial.

Other Ancillary Information:

It is conjectured that the snow topography prior to the event may have given the survivors their second chance. In some instances, the wind swirling around this section of highway has been known to create a wind loaded lip and overhang, which can result in a 4 to 5 ft wall/cornice. It is possible that as the avalanche carried the victims toward the wall and overhang that it swept the survivors into a position in which they were under the overhang or a collapsed portion of it and therefore had access to a hole or air pocket beneath the overhang. It is evident that the male had enough mobility to slowly dig his way toward the surface and apparently, the second person recovered alive had enough mobility to get into her backpack and eat some candy or bars, as wrappings were found near her when she was uncovered. This extra food may have contributed to her live recovery as she was found hypothermic with a body temperature of 88 degrees.

Report compiled by Garth Ferber and Mark Moore
Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center
14 December 2003