



News Release

Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests &
Thunder Basin National Grassland
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Avalanche Danger is High on the Medicine Bow and Routt National Forests

(LARAMIE, Wyo.) January 23, 2012 – Officials from the Medicine Bow and Routt National Forests are reminding winter recreationists, and especially snowmobile riders, that recent weather has created dangerous avalanche conditions.

Periods of warm weather have created a freeze-thaw chain of events, and thus an icy base layer of snow. Recent snow accumulation and high winds are making the snowpack unstable and putting avalanche conditions at a dangerous level. Sliding and unstable snow was reported over this past weekend.

An avalanche accident was reported from the east side of Buffalo Pass in the Steamboat zone involving two snowmobilers. Rescue efforts began Sunday and are still in progress.

Parts of the Routt National Forest are under a special advisory for considerable avalanche danger according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center. Conditions are similar on the Medicine Bow National Forest.

“We are very concerned about the conditions as well as the rate of accidents so far this year,” said Chris Spurl, acting director of recreation, heritage and wilderness resources for the U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region. “We urge forest visitors to use extreme caution when accessing these areas. It’s not enough to have the right equipment and training; avoiding avalanche-prone areas is the safest approach.”

Following are avalanche safety recommendations for National Forest visitors during the winter:

- There is no avalanche control and forest users must know the snow conditions and their abilities.
- Conditions can change rapidly in the backcountry. Be prepared for extreme conditions, carry appropriate survival gear and be prepared for self-rescue.
- Remember these safety items: shovel, beacon, probe, and KNOWLEDGE.
- Don’t snowmobile alone.
- Know how to use your emergency gear. Items such as an avalanche beacon are not useful if they cannot be properly used.
- Much terrain throughout the Rocky Mountain region is subject to avalanches. When traveling or recreating in those areas, you are responsible for the safety of yourself and those around you.
- Get avalanche savvy and take a certified avalanche course.
- Pick up a map of the area you plan to visit. Winter recreation maps, such as the Wyoming State Trails Association Snowmobile maps, often show avalanche prone areas.

“Current conditions have provided the perfect squall for avalanches throughout the Rockies,” said Kelly Elder, supervisory research hydrologist, at the Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research

Station. “The shallow snowpack forms weak, poorly bonded layers and when a snowstorm or wind deposits a sudden load on top of this weak snowpack, things move and there is an avalanche.”

Avalanche potential increases with increasing slope angle, snowfall, rain, wind, changing temperatures, other factors. Avalanche hazard can escalate in a very short time. If you do not have avalanche training, consider sticking to low profile, non-avalanche prone terrain. Recent avalanches are the best indicator of avalanche danger.

Although the majority of avalanche accidents occur in the backcountry, an avalanche can occur in areas thought to be safe. Ski areas provide a high level of avalanche control on their managed slopes within bounds, but remember that during severe weather events or poor conditions even these areas may be subject to elevated avalanche conditions. Stay out of closed and roped off areas and use the buddy system.

Backcountry users should also be aware of potential risks. They should be skilled at recognizing potential avalanche areas and snowpack conditions, and should be able to act accordingly. It is recommended that backcountry users perform careful snowpack evaluations and stability tests prior to entering an avalanche-prone area. There are plenty of routes for safer backcountry travel in avalanche country. Be able to recognize and use them as needed.

“Slopes that are close to sliding are just waiting for a trigger, such as a skier, snowboarder, or snowmobiler. The problem does not go away once we have an avalanche cycle, because the weak base layers just get reloaded by the next storm. If we get a huge storm, then we will see the ‘perfect storm,’ rather than the ‘perfect squall,’ the best protection a person can get is to take an avalanche class so you know what you are getting into,” said Elder.

For more information about winter recreation on the Medicine Bow and Routt National Forests, please visit or contact our offices in Douglas, Laramie and Saratoga, Wyo., as well as Steamboat Springs, Walden and Yampa, Colo., or visit us at www.fs.usda.gov/mbr. Call 307-745-2398 for district-specific contact information.

References for Additional Information:

- U.S. Forest Service, National Avalanche Center:
http://www.fsavalanche.org/basics/basic_index.html
- Colorado Avalanche Information Center: <http://avalanche.state.co.us>
- Colorado State Parks Snowmobile Program:
<http://parks.state.co.us/OHVsandSnowmobiles/SnowmobileProgram/Pages/SnowmobileProgramHome.aspx>
- Wyoming Snowmobile Trails & Information: <http://wyotrails.state.wy.us/snow/>

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