Chinook Pass: 25 Years On

John Stimberis
Washington State Department of Transportation, Ellensburg, WA, USA

Washington State Route 410 over Chinook Pass (1656 m) is generally closed from late November through late May each year due to heavy snow loads and avalanche hazards. By early April each year, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) begins clearing the highway. The clearing project exposes highway workers to over 100 avalanche paths as they make their way toward the summit of Chinook Pass. This process has been repeated each year since 1935.

In 1983 the WSDOT Avalanche Forecasting and Control Program was called upon to provide assistance with the spring opening. This marked the beginning of a unique backcountry avalanche program where travel to avalanche paths is limited to ski touring, and the avalanche forecasters have the opportunity to work closely with the snowpack as it transitions from a fine-grain, layered snow pack to a homogenous, well-drained snow pack.

At the 1986 International Snow Science Workshop, Craig Wilbour presented an overview of this newly created program. This paper and corresponding presentation will provide an update of the Chinook Pass Avalanche Forecasting and Control Program, some 25 years after its inception.