

Avalanche rescue: the United States experience, 1999/00 to 2008/09

Dale Atkins

RECCO AB, Boulder, CO, USA

Avalanche accidents and fatalities have been increasing over the years, and experience continues to show time as the enemy of the buried avalanche victim. A review of more than 300 buried avalanche victims during the 10-year period of 1999/00 to 2008/09 shows a buried victim's chance for survival also depends on the type and method of rescue, which affect the speed of the rescue. It is well known that most survivors of avalanche burials are found by companions; however, the statistics are discouraging as only 56% of buried companions survived. The number of victims rescued alive by organized rescue teams has increased notably — from 8% to 10% — from the 1990s; however, as companion rescue skills improve, organized rescue is becoming important not only in finding people, but in a new role of providing medical care and evacuation. With faster response times by organized rescue teams and more people recreating in avalanche terrain, more parties having suffered an accident are finding themselves helped by other recreational groups or fast-responding rescue teams blurring the classic roles of companion and organized rescue. Rescue techniques are important for speedy rescues and saving lives. Results from different techniques — beacons, dogs, probes, Recco, etc. — are presented from the 10-year period. With the information learned from actual avalanche rescues, specific recommendations are made to assist both recreationalists and professional (including non-paid) rescuers in preparing for and providing avalanche rescue.