2010 Saddle Peak avalanche: sidecountry challenges, misconceptions, and lessons

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On February 16th, 2010 a person accidentally kicked off a cornice that triggered a large slide on Saddle Peak immediately outside Bridger Bowl’s boundary. This slide narrowly missed killing several people, and the immense snow cloud was seen throughout the ski area. While the avalanche surprised many, avalanche professionals at the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center (GNFAC) and Bridger Bowl Ski Area have anticipated such an event since this sidecountry area was opened up two years ago. We have tried to educate the public about the accident potential through signage, articles, a special DVD, and education efforts targeting youth and their parents. Despite our best efforts Saddle Peak is heavily skied by all ages, with multiple people on the slope at the same time and with no regards for, and apparent knowledge of, safe backcountry travel techniques. Moreover, the slide demonstrated the fallacy of skier compaction for preventing large hard slab avalanches. In December 2009 a layer of facets was buried by a supportable hard slab impervious to the thousands of skiers who skied the slope during the season. A mid-February storm dropped over three inches of SWE, setting up the conditions leading to the slide.