

# BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND DIVERSIFYING FUNDING FOR BACKCOUNTRY AVALANCHE FORECASTING

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## ABSTRACT

In this era of government fiscal austerity it is becoming necessary for some services which have been dependent on federal funding in the past to diversify their base of support. Community involvement and/or new funding sources can help offset shrinking federal budget allocations. Sizable budget cuts for the Utah Avalanche Forecast Center (UAFC) were announced by the U.S. Forest Service prior to the 1993/94 season. In response to these cuts a volunteer organization called Friends of the UAFC reorganized and increased its efforts. Among its goals are the development of new funding partnerships and of a stronger sense of community ownership. The first year brought some success, including the maintenance of previous levels of funding through new sources and the development of a new local forecast center in the Logan area. The first year also brought some challenges, and the need for a long term funding strategy became apparent. The question of what role a volunteer organization can and should play arose. It became clear that the UAFC, the US Forest Service, and Friends of the UAFC had to have a common vision on these matters. In an attempt to develop long term goals and strategies a comparison of sources of support for several US centers was compiled.

## BACKGROUND

During the 1992/93 forecasting season the United States Forest Service (USFS) announced its plans to reduce funding for the Utah Avalanche Forecast Center (UAFC) by 40% for the 1993/94 season. Additional cuts were planned for following seasons. The UAFC provides a service for backcountry recreationists and has no direct responsibility for highway control, ski areas, or other developments. It was felt that the constituency for this service was very small, particularly in relation to the amount of funding provided (Sieg, 1994). The goal of the cuts was to bring about a funding partnership which would include state and local governments as well as users of the service (Lindler, 1994).

The UAFC was relatively well situated to bring such a funding partnership about. Salt Lake City is a sizable metropolitan area with very accessible mountain terrain and a large community of outdoor recreationists. The center is heavily used and has become an integral part of the community. One of the most important factors was the existence of a nonprofit organization which could become the basis for diversifying funding and building community support. Since 1991 the group Friends of the UAFC (FoUAFC) had legally existed. It had mainly been a means for a few skiers to contribute to the UAFC by holding occasional fundraising events. It can also purchase and own certain equipment for use by

UAFC personnel and pay backcountry observers. Without the existence of this framework the situation would have been far more difficult.

In the spring of 1993 an announcement was made on the forecast telephone line and a special meeting was held. A board of directors was formed and plans were made to compensate for the USFS cuts. A little more than one year later this group has a budget in excess of fifty thousand dollars and contributes substantially to the operating budget of the UAFC. Support comes from users of the service, local businesses, and county government. The state government will also contribute to the budget of the UAFC beginning this year. (State funding does not go to FoUAFC, but goes directly to the center.)

### SOURCES OF FUNDING FOR BACKCOUNTRY FORECASTING

In order to get an idea of how funding might be diversified the sources of funding for the four major avalanche forecasting organizations in the US are compared. The centers included are the UAFC, the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, the Northwest Avalanche Center, and the Southwest Montana Avalanche Center. The Colorado Center and the NW Center both receive large amounts of money from state transportation departments, but these funds are omitted here because only the nonhighway functions are of interest. Figures 1 and 2 show the sources of funding for the past two seasons in chart form. Table I gives the total non-DOT (Department of Transportation) budget, USFS dependence, and the number of sources of funding.

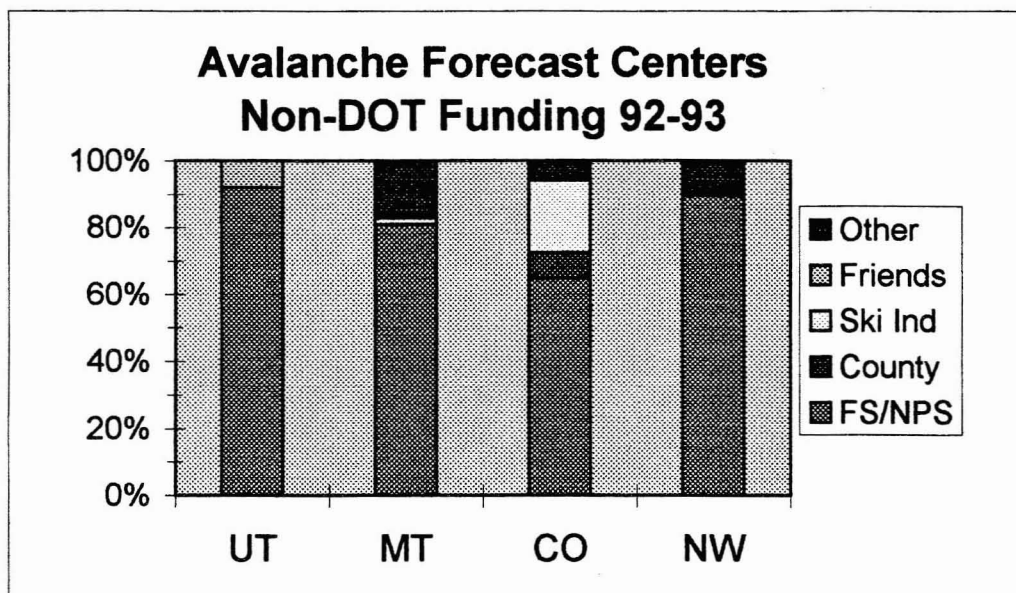
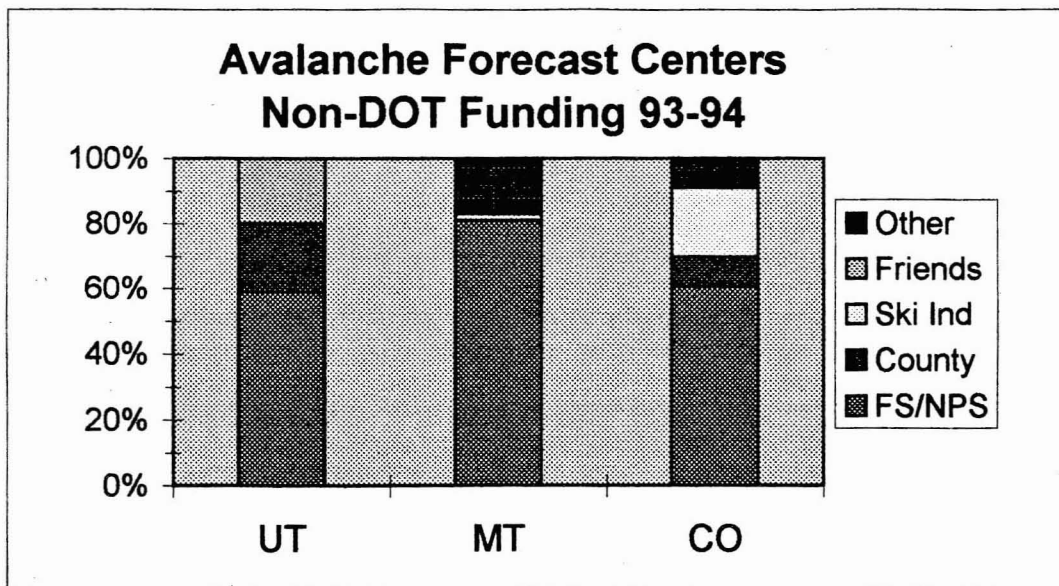


FIGURE 1



**FIGURE 2** (NW Annual Report was not available)

	UT	CO	NW	MT
1992-93				
Budget	\$83,500	\$103,971	\$103,170	\$34,550
USFS	92%	65%	89%	81%
# Sources	2	7	3	6
1993-94				
Budget	\$96,200	\$107,347	Not available	\$34,550
USFS	59%	61%	Not available	81%
# Sources	3	7	Not available	5

**Table I - Non-DOT funding of avalanche centers.**

The figures used here depend somewhat on how things are categorized, particularly the number of funding sources. While most of the funding comes from the USFS, the remainder comes from a wide diversity of sources. Table II lists all the sources of support found in the annual reports of the four major centers.

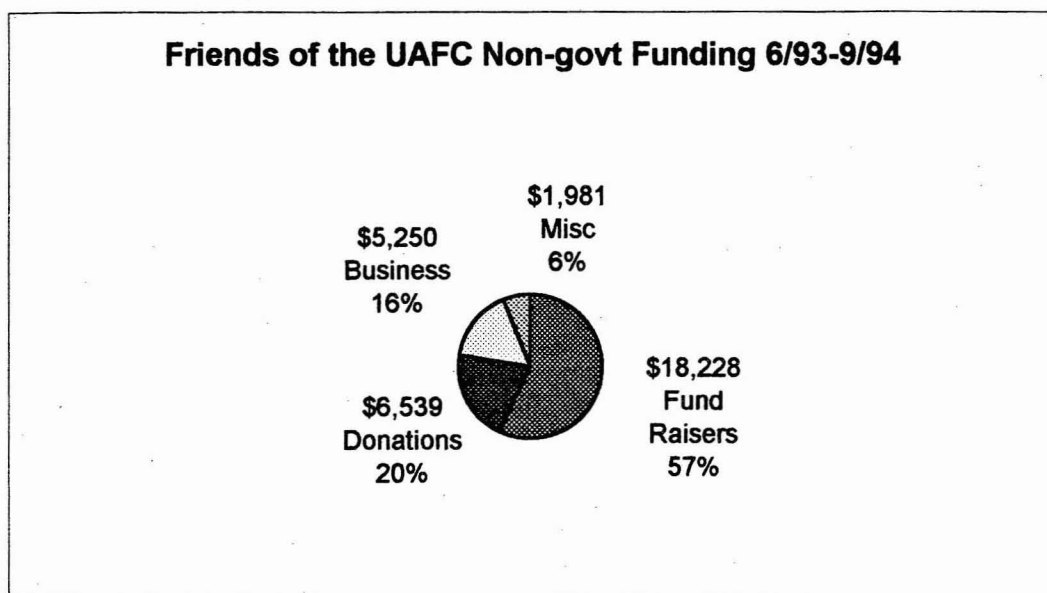
Sources of Support	
Search and Rescue Groups	Mining Concerns
Resort Taxes	Ski Industry
State Government	Local Government
Groups (Mtn Clubs etc.)	Foundations
Businesses	Individuals
Sales (Videos etc.)	

**Table II - Sources of Support for Avalanche Forecasting (Nonfederal, Non DOT)**

## DIVERSIFICATION OF FUNDING

Tapping these numerous sources of support can be a difficult task. Forecast center personnel will probably have only limited success in building a diverse funding partnership unless they receive assistance from others. In Utah, much of the funding diversity developed over the last two years has come about through FoUAFC. This organization has served as a means of involving volunteers and community leaders.

In the last year and a half, FoUAFC has raised in excess of \$50,000. County governments provided \$20,500 of this, with the remainder coming mostly from businesses and individuals. The nongovernment part is shown in Figure 3.



**FIGURE 3**

It has taken almost two years to develop a diversity of funding which appears to be sustainable. The initial response was permeated by a sense of panic, and FoUAFC scrambled for whatever money could be found. Involving the business community was difficult at first, due largely to a lack of coordinated efforts. The first fundraising event held raised about \$1000. A year and a half later an annual fall event has been established which raised in excess of \$8,000 this year. This year's fundraiser was hosted by a major outdoor equipment manufacturer, and other businesses donated items for a silent auction. This new level of involvement on the part of local businesses should contribute substantially to funding the service.

In one year, the USFS component of the UAFC budget dropped from over 90% to less than 60%. For the approaching season it is anticipated to be 50% or less.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Behind this diversification of funding lies a great deal of community support. Funding from the state and county governments was the result of lobbying by key community leaders. Fundraising events were successful because of volunteers who were willing to devote a large amount of time and energy to organizing them. There is great interest in snow and avalanche science among outdoor enthusiasts, and many of them will donate time and/or money if they receive even a little encouragement.

Fundraising and working with volunteers can be time consuming and frustrating for some forecast personnel. However, these tasks are of great importance if dependence on the federal government is to be minimized through the building of new partnerships. Individuals who would like to get involved, and have much to contribute, will hesitate if they feel the snow science community is exclusive and unappreciative. It is up to forecast personnel to go the extra mile and make potential volunteers feel like their efforts are not only welcome but important.

Perceptions of the 'user community' need to be broadened. Many people other than the 'hard-core' backcountry skiers and climbers use avalanche forecasting services. Some check the forecast for the mountain weather, or even the weather in general. Others check it out of interest. Resort skiers check it to get an objective report of new snow totals and conditions. These people need to be made to feel they are part of the 'community,' and that their support is both necessary and appreciated.

Marketing the service as something that meets a wide variety of needs will help build support among a wider base of people. Avalanche forecasting services are often promoted as necessary for saving lives. While this is a worthy goal, and hopefully one which is achieved, it is somewhat narrow. There is a limit to how much society will pay to save lives, especially if the number of lives is relatively small. There is also a reluctance on the part of the general public to finance activities which are viewed as inherently risky. This has led to the current debate over rescue insurance in the US National Park system. Promoting a broader mission will help build a broader community for support.

It is important that the user community, the forecast center, and the USFS share a common vision. The user community is primarily interested in maintaining, and perhaps improving, a local service which they perceive to be important. Forecast center personnel often have additional interests at the national and international levels. The USFS has an ongoing interest in maintaining quality forecasting services. While they can no longer fund such services entirely, they remain an important partner. In Utah a planning session involving all three of these groups was held at the end of the 1993/94 season. Such events should be held on a regular basis.

## THE FUTURE

It is unclear what the future will bring in terms of federal support for services such as backcountry avalanche forecasting. Given the current budgetary problems, it would be foolish to count on past levels of support continuing. In Utah we are well on our way to a funding partnership in which the USFS will contribute 50% or less. Other centers should consider laying the groundwork for diversifying their support before it becomes a last minute effort of necessity. Backcountry forecasting services can, and should, be funded by a diverse partnership which is based on solid community support.

## REFERENCES

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