

THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE  
WESTWIDE AVALANCHE NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

In 1967 the U.S. Forest Service Avalanche Research Project established the Westwide Avalanche Network. This is a data-gathering network of mountain sites in the Western United States that has built a long-term data base of weather, snowpack, and avalanche information. The purposes for establishing the network were: (1) understanding climate and snowpack conditions for hazard assessment and forecasting, and (2) establishing effective and efficient control programs.

In 1983 management of the network shifted to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center. The Forest Service continues to fund the network. It has been operational for 27 years and has grown to a stable level of approximately 50 data sites. Most sites are ski areas, but also included are highway passes, National Park sites, backcountry sites, and one mining site. All are manned observation sites.

Data are recorded on three forms: (1) Monthly summary of weather and snow conditions; (2) Avalanche control and occurrence chart; and (3) Avalanche accident reporting form. The weather and avalanche data are stored on magnetic tape and computer hard drive at the Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station in Fort Collins. Length of record varies greatly: Stevens Pass, Alta, and Berthoud Pass began recording in the 1940's and 1950's; many sites began from 1967-73; and others began in the early 1980's. The accident reports are stored at the Colorado Avalanche Information Center in Denver.

The data are used by the regional avalanche centers in the Western United States and are available in raw form to all users. The network handles 30-40 requests per year for data. The data also provide the basis for U.S. avalanche accident statistics and analysis. Two publications are generated by the data: Avalanche Notes, a monthly data and newsletter; and The Snowy Torrents, a periodic documentation and analysis of avalanche accidents.