Expanding into Avalanche Terrain: A Case Study

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The Breckenridge Ski Resort Snow Safety Team has experienced the current trend in ski area expansion into more extreme terrain and reviews this expansion in a case study. The presentation will include an overall look at Summit County, Colorado where Breckonridge is located. We will examine its weather patterns, geography and the Breckenridge Ski Area as it has grown from a small intermediate area of six hundred acres to two thousand and twenty three acres with more than sixty percent of its avalanche terrain. This growth has led to expansion into known avalanche terrain without the benefit of lift service.

We will look at how expansion has affected overall ski operations. External factors, such as forest service environmental groups and the local townspeople were dealt with through the Environmental Assessment process.

Many of our fellow patrollers were concerned with the extra work load and leaving familiar terrain for areas that just a few years before had proven to be deadly (five deaths in the expansion terrain). Our patrol structure and operating procedures have changed to accommodate growth. Programs were designed and implemented to accomplish training and skill development required to safely open this terrain.

The snow safety team has had to develop a familiarity with our new terrain, utilizing minimal weather or avalanche records to develop route procedures and opening/closing protocol. Patrollers need to hike 800 vertical feet to an elevation of 13,000 feet to access this new terrain. The team adjust to rapidly changing weather and snow conditions. Management of our new terrain must be balanced along with our responsibilities of first aid and trail maintenance. This multimedia presentation was given by a member of our snow safety team emphasizing problems we have encountered expanding on a large scale into non-life services avalanche terrain in a short period of time.