

LESSONS LEARNED:
CORDOVA, ALASKA'S RESIDENTIAL AVALANCHE ACCIDENT,
JAN. 26, 2000

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Abstract

During late January and early February 2000, a cycle of long-running, slab avalanches caused two deaths, blocked major transportation corridors, and hit or destroyed 38 buildings, 39 vehicles, and 32 transmission towers throughout southcentral Alaska. Access and power were cut for days to the communities south of Anchorage. As a result of more than 11 million dollars worth of damage, a federal avalanche disaster was declared for the first time in U.S. history.

On the morning of January 26, 2000, a major avalanche impacted a subdivision at milepost 5.5 of the Copper River Highway in Cordova, Alaska, a small community in eastern Prince William Sound. It killed one resident and severely injured another who was buried roughly 15 feet deep for more than six hours. Five houses and two warehouses were destroyed along with numerous outbuildings, cars, and boats. The Copper River Highway, the only road to the airport in a community accessible only by plane or boat, was blocked for more than 1000 feet and 1400 feet of transmission line was destroyed. This event was the impetus for the urban avalanche rescue response, avalanche hazard mapping and mitigation analysis, zoning ordinance, and federal buyout assistance program which will be discussed here. The response to this accident may set an important precedent for the inevitable future urban avalanche disasters in the United States.

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