

## **PARKS CANADA'S EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC AVALANCHE SAFETY**

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**ABSTRACT:** The winter of 2002/03 presented western Canada with one of the most complex and challenging snowpacks in recent memory. On February 1, 2003 in Glacier National Park of Canada, a large avalanche engulfed 17 people from a Calgary school on an outdoor education trip. That avalanche resulted in the death of 7 teenagers, and by season's end, a total of 29 people had perished in avalanches in Canada. The media reported extensively on these issues; the avalanche safety and guiding industries were scrutinized by the public eye like never before.

In the wake of this tragic event and season, Parks Canada initiated an independent review of its public avalanche safety programs. This resulted in the Backcountry Avalanche Risk Review, a document that challenges every aspect of the public avalanche safety program - a program built over decades by park wardens who have been recognized by their peers as national leaders.

Building upon this and three additional industry reviews, Parks Canada has embarked upon a fundamental reshaping of its public avalanche safety systems. This modernized program takes into account the changing demographics of backcountry use – and strives to create a cultural shift in avalanche awareness in Canada. With backcountry use now in the mainstream, so must become the delivery of avalanche information.

Key elements of this new program include: a new, multi tiered avalanche warning system which recognizes the modern audience; acknowledgement of the media as a target audience requiring a dedicated media portal to deliver this information; a classification system for avalanche terrain to assist public decision making; creation of a public “recreational” avalanche atlas for popular regions; and new regulations governing the leadership of youth groups in the backcountry.

This initiative represents a major project for Parks Canada, backed by an executive commitment to public avalanche safety. The process of change within an established industry comes with significant challenges, but the coming years will be an exciting time for both the Canadian avalanche professional, and all those who enjoy safe and informed backcountry travel.

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