

AVALANCHE CANADA'S SPECIAL PUBLIC AVALANCHE WARNING:
THE EVOLUTION OF A UNIQUE COMMUNICATIONS TOOL

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ABSTRACT: In 2005, the forecasters and communications director at Avalanche Canada recognized an impending confluence of avalanche, weather and human factors that we were sure would increase the risk of serious avalanche involvements. We were confident that regular readers of our bulletins were aware of the situation. Our main concern was untrained and uninformed backcountry users, who do little in the way of planning or preparation, would be at significant risk of being involved in an avalanche. As a result, we created the first Special Public Avalanche Warning (SPAW), a communications tool that leverages the power of the mainstream media to amplify our message.

This paper discusses the challenges faced in developing this product—specifically those inherent in dealing with the media, as well as objections from the professional community. It describes how SPAW strategy and execution has evolved to become an accepted, well-recognized and effective public avalanche safety communication tool. And it demonstrates that SPAWs complement traditional products such as forecasts, becoming an important addition to the holistic suite of products and services produced by Avalanche Canada.

KEYWORDS: Risk Communication, special public avalanche warning, media,

1. INTRODUCTION

In March of 2005 the forecasters and communications director at Avalanche Canada identified the need for a strategy that would allow us to inform backcountry users of an increased *risk* of avalanche accidents. At that time, we had recognized an impending confluence of factors that we felt sure could increase the likelihood of an accident, especially for certain users.

There was a significant but still developing persistent weak layer in the snowpack that was not producing natural avalanches. New snow was forecast but the load from the incoming cold, low-density powder with relatively light winds would not be enough to produce significant natural activity. With no natural avalanche activity expected, forecasters had to identify the hazard as Considerable—a rating that doesn't trigger a high degree of caution, especially among untrained recreationists.

The other issues contributing to our concern were human factors. Riding conditions had been relatively poor in southern BC and were expected to improve significantly with the coming new snow. This pent-up demand for good riding also coincided with a holiday long weekend, when we would expect even more people in the backcountry. These human factors, combined with the weak layer waiting for a trigger, all contributed to a perfect recipe for an elevated risk of an avalanche accident.

We were confident that regular, trained readers of our bulletins were well served. AvCan forecasters had been tracking the weak layer since it was established and had been consistently featuring it in daily forecasts as it became buried and incrementally loaded.

2. IDENTIFYING THE AUDIENCE

Our main concern was the many backcountry users who did little in the way of planning or

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preparation. We felt there was an increased chance these users would be exposed and vulnerable to avalanches. Untrained users, if they access avalanche information at all, tend to rely solely on the danger rating to guide their behaviour. And we feared the message presented by the Considerable rating did not effectively convey the increased potential for serious accidents.

We were also very aware that many backcountry users were completely unaware of our daily avalanche forecasts. Avalanche Canada had only been established in the fall of 2004, so the spring of 2005 was the end of our first winter season of operation. Prior to 2004, Canada did not have a national public avalanche safety organization. Parks Canada has a long and proud history of forecasting for the mountain national parks, and the Canadian Avalanche Association had been issuing bi-weekly public forecasts for a small number of regions in western Canada since the mid-90s. But a dedicated public avalanche safety organization with daily forecasts was still a new concept in 2005.

Knowing our website wasn't pulling in many of the untrained, unaware users, and our concern about the Considerable danger rating not triggering an appropriate response, it seemed clear that stating our concerns through our normal channels wasn't going to be enough. We knew we weren't reaching the audience we felt was at greatest risk. Clearly, we needed to communicate our concerns to a wider audience by pushing information out to them in some way. We decided the easiest, most cost-effective method to accomplish that goal would be through the mainstream media. We then issued what became our first Special Public Avalanche Warning (SPAW)

3. MEDIA AS A SOLUTION

The SPAW leverages the power of the mainstream media to amplify our message. It's a news release issued to media outlets across western Canada, which essentially invites reporters to cover our warning as a news story. By making our safety concerns "news" we were able to exponentially increase the reach of our communication.

As a former journalist, I was very aware of what would constitute news. A good news release is written to make the journalist's job as easy as possible. Ideally, I wanted to see our releases published or quoted verbatim. In that way, we could manage our message as effectively and completely as possible.

Our SPAWS are written like a news story—using an 'inverted pyramid' structure, with the most important information at the top. Journalists use this structure because if a story has to be edited for length, an editor can delete the last paragraphs, knowing the pertinent facts will remain.

In addition to the basic structure, I include a good quote from one of our spokespeople. A quote gives life to the piece, adds value to the story, and is written in an engaging voice, free of jargon. Quotes are important to reporters because it gives them a bit more to work with. They want to engage their readers, viewers and listeners; providing our media partners with colourful, real language helps them do that.

As with any powerful tool, using the media has potential pitfalls. The concept we're aiming to communicate is relatively complex—we are warning of an elevated risk for an avalanche accident. As you can imagine, this can be easily mistaken for a warning that the danger level is elevated. Over the years there have been numerous news reports saying: "Avalanche Canada warns of extreme avalanche danger."

There really isn't any scope for going into the difference between risk and hazard with reporters. When stories are wrong, I follow up with the media outlet immediately and get them to correct it. This is rarely an issue; they don't want to get it wrong and are generally always open to making the correction.

The best way to avoid inaccurate interpretations is clear language and preparation. Aiming for precision in our releases is primary; I avoid the word 'extreme' at all costs and take great care to try and foresee what may be misinterpreted and honing the message to avoid that pitfall.

Preparation is also a key component. When you send out an invitation for media coverage, you need to be ready. At the start of each season

forecasters undergo media training. Before the SPAW is issued, we assign designated spokespeople who are provided with key messages. Again, the aim is simple, clear, focused communication. We make no more than three points and using the skills taught in media training sessions, our spokespeople know how to keep the interview on track for those particular messages.

4. INFORMING PARTNERS

In addition to the challenges inherent in dealing with the media, we also faced challenges from the guiding community when we first introduced the SPAW. In those early days, we received calls fairly regularly from ski guiding companies complaining that our SPAWS were frightening their clients.

One error we made early on was not explicitly stating the SPAW is meant for recreational backcountry users. This was easily fixed. A clear statement that the warning applies only to recreationists quickly became standard content in all SPAWs. We also spent a fair amount of energy engaging directly with the guiding companies, essentially coaching them on how to answer their clients who were wondering if they should cancel their trip because of our SPAW.

The answer to their clients was simple. Avalanche Canada's SPAWs are issued for large regions and by necessity, take a "broad brush" approach. Professionals have their own risk management systems in place, refined specifically to manage the terrain within their tenure. The SPAW is aimed at recreational users who are making their own decisions in avalanche terrain. By going into the mountains with a professional ski guide, the risk is managed by well-trained professionals with many years of experience familiar with local terrain and conditions.

Another error we made early on was not always giving our partners notification that we were issuing a SPAW. We quickly saw this was vital not only for the guiding community but also to other avalanche forecasting agencies in Canada—namely Parks Canada and Alberta Parks' Kananaskis Country. Again, it was fairly simple to include a "heads-up" email as part of our process. The heads-up email has evolved

into a dialogue between Avalanche Canada, industry partners and other forecasting agencies to not only provide notification of a SPAW but to solicit information and opinions about whether a SPAW is warranted and its geographical extent.

These efforts to better include our partners helped to create a very open and collaborative environment that definitely helped in the relatively quick resolution of their concerns and significantly improved the content of our SPAWs. Today, instead of getting complaints that we've issued a warning, we regularly receive messages from the guiding community telling us we should consider issuing a SPAW.

5. THE SPAW PROCESS

Avalanche Canada's SPAW process has evolved into a very efficient and effective procedures, allowing us to go from discussing a SPAW to issuing one with complete preparedness within 24 hours. To help us make this decision, we have developed clear criteria for assessing if a SPAW is the appropriate tool and when to apply it. These are:

- An avalanche problem that is unusual or not obvious, especially to unaware or novice recreationists who have no or only minimal training.
- An avalanche problem that is out of the ordinary for a given area. For example, a persistent slab problem associated with surface hoar layer in a coastal region.
- A condition where the danger ratings alone may not fully convey the seriousness of the situation. Especially when danger ratings are getting lower but lingering, residual hazard remains, for example ratings move from High to Considerable or from Considerable to Moderate but residual risk of human triggering of significant avalanches remains.
- Conditions that tempt people into the mountains. Especially when riding conditions have improved or are expected to improve after a period of poor conditions.
- Weather that will entice people into the mountains and does not give the

impression that avalanches are a potential problem. Especially a rapid, significant improvement, e.g. warm, blue sky days after an extended period of stormy or poor weather.

- Other factors that encourage increased backcountry recreational use, such as weekends or holidays.
- We feel we can provide clear advice that will help recreationists better manage their avalanche risk.

In short, we assess physical snowpack characteristics, weather conditions and human decision-making factors when assessing whether a SPAW is warranted, requiring us to provide information that clearly defines ways to manage risk.

Pent up demand due to previous poor weather or poor riding conditions combined with a good weather forecast; improved riding conditions; danger ratings decreasing; a weekend, long weekend, or holiday period; and tricky conditions (which aren't obvious) can combine into "perfect storm" for avalanche accidents and are a classic scenario in which we issue a SPAW.

In addition, we've documented a standard procedure that's applied weekly to assess our messaging strategies and if a SPAW is warranted, how to go about preparing and issuing it. The main steps include:

A regular assessment of the current snowpack, focusing on unusual or tricky issues such as

persistent weak layers that might not be obvious to the public.

- A weekly long-range weather outlook that offers insight into if and when changes in the snowpack might catch people by surprise.
- A review of riding conditions, with an eye especially to significant improvement after an extended period of poor snow quality.
- Tracking the dates of holidays in various provinces that bring more people into the mountains.
- Collaboration between the forecasting team, communications director, and other senior staff to hear input from various perspectives.
- Communicating with industry and public safety partners to inform them of our concerns, solicit feedback, gather information, and coordinate the release of information.

A standard approach coupled with a good understanding of journalism is required to make effective use of broadcast media. When done right a tool like Avalanche Canada's SPAWs are a powerful way to engage users that are difficult to reach by other channels. SPAWs are now part of the regular lineup in Avalanche Canada's suite of public avalanche safety products.

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