

25 | ANNUAL 26 | REPORT



**Flathead
Avalanche**

About Us

Avalanche forecasting, education, and outreach in northwest Montana.



Flathead Avalanche

is a partnership between the Flathead National Forest Flathead Avalanche Center (FAC) and the Friends of the Flathead Avalanche Center (FOFAC), a 501(c)(3) organization. The FAC and FOFAC are united by our commitment to sharing information that reduces avalanche incidents and fatalities.

Flathead Avalanche programs help improve the chances of safe backcountry outcomes for winter recreation in our region.

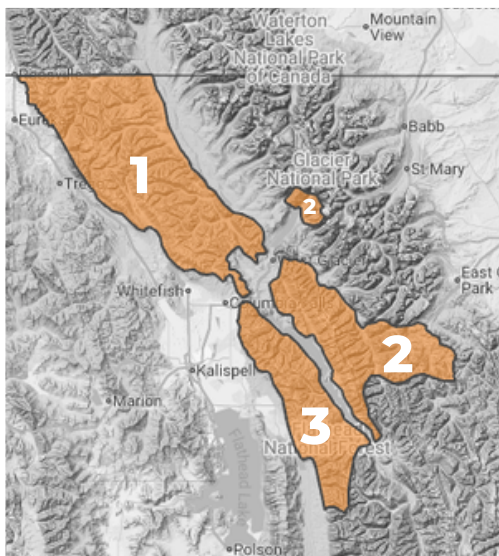
Flathead Avalanche Center (FAC)

is a program of the United States Forest Service's Flathead National Forest. As a Type 1 Avalanche center, we issue daily forecasts for approximately 1.2 million acres of public land, encompassing the Whitefish, Flathead, and Swan Ranges, as well as portions of the Apgar, Livingston, and Lewis Ranges in Glacier National Park.

Friends of the Flathead Avalanche Center (FOFAC)

is the non-profit arm of Flathead Avalanche and is guided by a community board. Our mission is to financially support the FAC and save lives through avalanche education. We teach thousands of people every season and have secured funding for major projects to improve weather stations, provide the Avy App and flatheadavalanche.org. We also focus on community building and outreach through public communications and events.

Forecast Zones



1. Whitefish Range

From the Canadian border south to the Flathead Valley.

2. Flathead Range & Glacier NP

The Great Bear Wilderness, Lake McDonald, & Marias Pass areas.

3. Swan Range

From Columbia Mountain to Napa Point.

Dear Friends and Supporters,

Thank you for supporting avalanche safety in Northwest Montana. Everything we accomplish is possible because of this incredible community—our donors, volunteers, partners, local businesses, and backcountry users who believe in the importance of avalanche forecasting and education.

During the 2025–2026 season, the Flathead Avalanche Center continued providing daily avalanche forecasts for the Whitefish, Swan, and Flathead Ranges, helping people make informed decisions in the backcountry. Our forecasting team spent countless hours in the field tracking snowpack conditions and delivering timely, reliable information throughout the winter. We also continued growing our education and outreach efforts, connecting with hundreds of backcountry users through avalanche awareness presentations, rescue clinics, courses, and community events.

While public partnerships remain essential, nonprofit support plays a critical role in sustaining this work. Because of your generosity, we've been able to support forecasting operations, invest in equipment and technology, expand education, and strengthen avalanche awareness across our region. Thank you for being part of the Flathead Avalanche Center community—we truly couldn't do it without you.

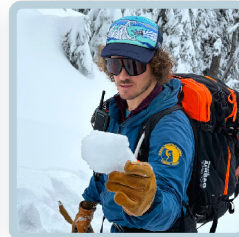
With gratitude,
Zak Anderson
FOFAC Board President



Our Team

Flathead Avalanche Staff

First Row: Chris Prew (FNF Recreation Staff Officer), Blase Reardon (FAC Director), Mark Dundas (Lead Forecaster), Rob Millspaugh (Avalanche Specialist)
Second Row: Mike Reavis (Field Technician), Guy Zoellner (Avalanche Specialist), Josh Lipkowitz (Avalanche Specialist), Cam Johnson (Avalanche Specialist)
Third Row: Jenny Cloutier (FOFAC Executive Director), Meg Killen (Education Director), Clare George (Education Specialist), Corrie Holloway (FOFAC Communications Director), Not pictured: Emily Lewis (Design Intern)



Flathead National Forest:

(Not Pictured) Tami MacKenzie (Deputy Forest Supervisor), Tad Wehunt (Partnership Coordinator)

Board of Directors:

(Not pictured) Zak Anderson (President), Ed Visnovske (Vice President), Mikaela Bourret (Secretary/Treasurer), Lloyd Morsett, James Heckman, Tim Shaw, Nolwenn Denis, Josh Nielson

Season In Review

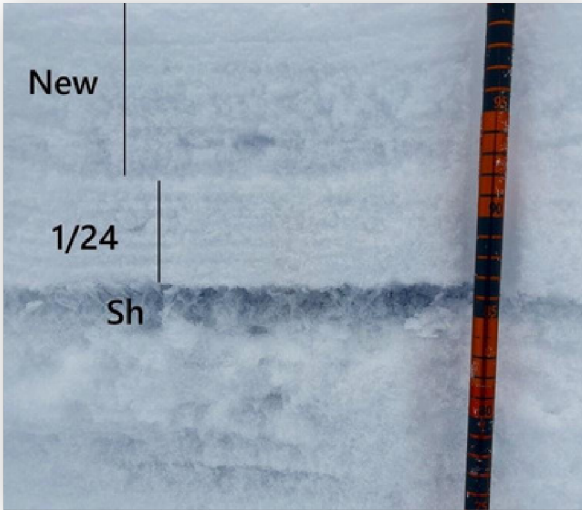


Tallie Steiner watches Sara Kovalsky worm through deadfall in the Flathead Range, April 25. David Kerner image.

Early Season: Atmospheric River, Blow-Down, and Drought

Two early-season events proved significant through the entire winter—an Atmospheric River in December and a late-January drought. The AR's deluge was accompanied by powerful winds; the low-elevation snowpack vanished, and tens of thousands of trees blew down. The lack of snow and disheartening deadfall limited access to popular riding areas all season, particularly in the Flathead zone.

In January, the region saw two weeks of cold, dry weather with unusually light winds. That period ended with a layer of large, upright surface hoar grains sitting on a slick crust. It was surprisingly widespread, existing even near ridgelines where surface hoar layers aren't usually preserved.



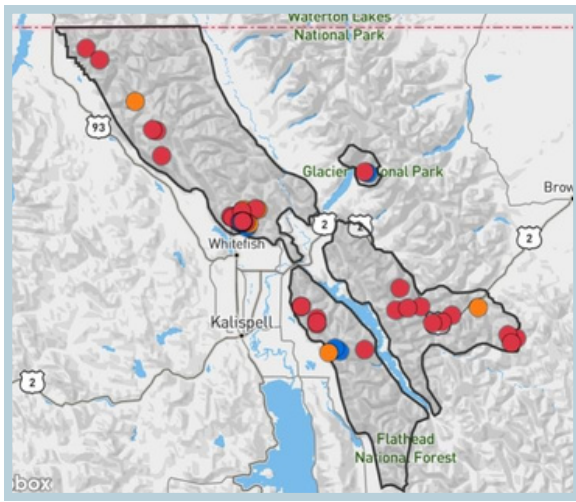
The January Drought Layer on January 30, shortly after it was buried. The few inches of low-density snow that fell on January 24 preserved the surface hoar upright, allowing it to persist as a high-porosity, easily collapsible layer for several months. A heavier load likely would have collapsed the layer quickly, limiting its sensitivity and duration. Swan Range, Jan. 30, Chris Gotschalk image.

Mid Season: Avalanche Cycles and Prolonged Danger

The January Drought Layer (JDL) announced itself as a major player with a remotely-triggered D3 slab in the Flathead Range on February 12. An FAC video of this event on Instagram racked up 3.8 million views. The JDL remained the primary concern nearly the rest of the season. It was the culprit for a remarkably prolonged period of elevated avalanche danger, a rash of human-triggered avalanches, near-misses and accidents, and two cycles of very large natural avalanches.

Over 11 days in late February, the FAC received 19 reports of human-triggered hard slabs, many that released remotely. Some had crowns extending 1500 to 2000 thousand feet. Seven riders were reported caught and carried, with four confirmed partial or full burials and a fifth unconfirmed full burial. The FAC issued avalanche warnings on three days and a Special Avalanche Bulletin for four more. The last report of a human-triggered slide failing on the JDL occurred March 2. It was a D3 hard slab triggered remotely on a slope adjacent to the site of the February 12 remotely-triggered soft slab that announced the cycle.

Despite its apparent lack of sensitivity to riders, the JDL continued to produce avalanches—large to very large natural avalanches. The first cycles resulted from storms in early and mid-March that dumped several feet of snow accompanied by extreme winds. The FAC issued avalanche warnings on two days during the second storm.



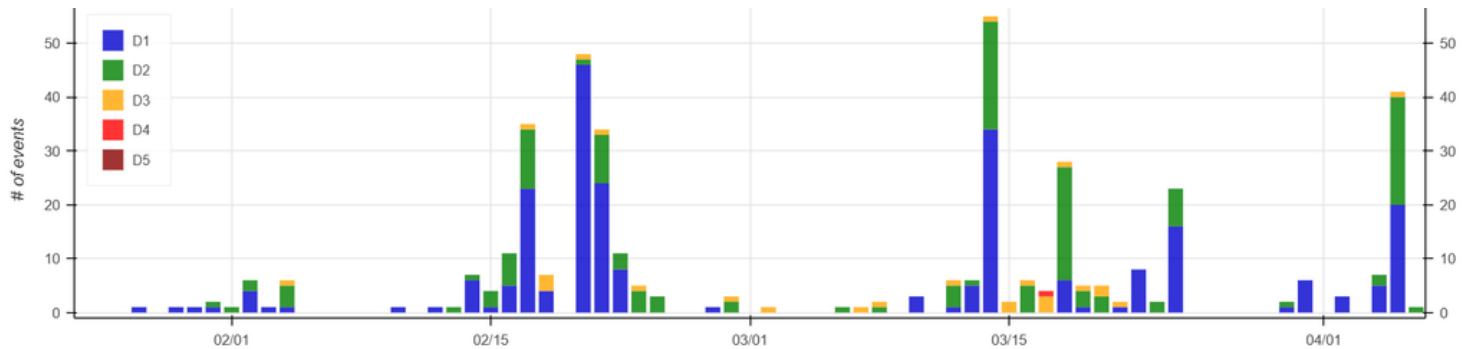
Following this dramatic loading came a one-two punch—the season’s first warming event, then rain at upper elevations. The combination produced another multi-day round of large to very large (D2-4) natural avalanches, primarily in the Swan and Flathead zones. The FAC issued avalanche warnings for three days in all zones, with an additional warning day in the Flathead zone. On March 22, the prolonged period of elevated avalanche danger finally eased, and the FAC dropped the danger to Moderate after 34 consecutive days at Considerable or High.

Observations in the Flathead Region from Feb. 15 to 24. Of the 55 obs submitted during this period, 37 (67%) reported avalanches. Another 7 (13%) included reports of collapsing or cracking but no avalanches. The 11 obs that didn’t report signs of instability were nearly all from the Swan Front or the WMR sidecountry.

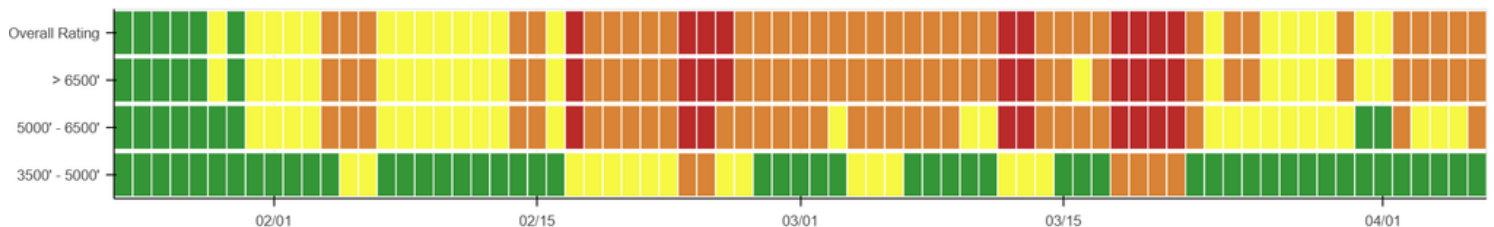


A human-triggered avalanche on Half Moon just outside the boundary of Whitefish Mountain Resort. Feb 20.

Avalanche Events



Flathead Range & Glacier NP Hazard Rating



Top: Reported avalanches for the entire forecast region Jan. 24 through Apr. 5, 2026. Spikes in event numbers highlight human-triggered avalanche events from Feb. 17 - March 2, and loading- and warming-driven natural avalanche cycles in March.

Bottom: Danger ratings by elevation band for the Flathead zone in the same period. The unusually sustained period of elevated danger from mid-February to late March stands out.

Late Season: Cold Storms and the JDL's Last Gasp



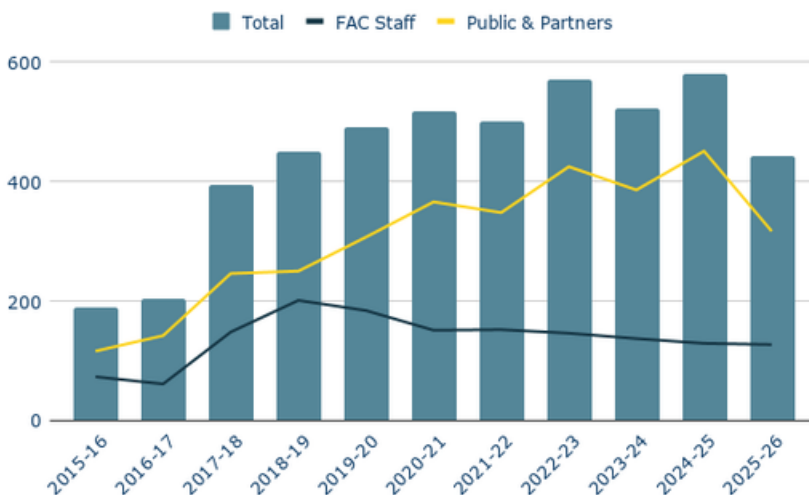
The last gasp of the JDL - a very large natural avalanche on Nyack Mountain in the Flathead zone that released May 10. Michael Reavis image.

Once the JDL structure went dormant, the region saw some of the season's most winter-like conditions. Storms in late March/early April brought one to three feet of snow to upper elevations. One snowmobiler was caught and carried in the Swan Range. The rider escaped burial after deploying an airbag, the season's third reported airbag deployment. FAC ended daily forecasts with several days of Considerable avalanche danger in the Swan and Flathead zones.

After another cold storm in mid-April, the avalanche season seemed over. The JDL had the last word, however. A very large natural wet slab avalanche (D3) released in the Flathead Range on May 10. It capped a 16-week period in which the FAC tallied 109 avalanches size D1.5 or larger that failed on the JDL. Over 50 percent of the FAC's forecasts for the 2025-26 season rated the danger at Considerable or High (compared to a mean of 31 percent for the previous five winters), and the FAC issued avalanche warnings on ten days. It was a challenging season for forecasters and riders alike, one that ended with a collective "Whew!" after no accidents with serious outcomes.

Observations

Number of Observations



The total number of observations declined, likely due to challenging access and elevated danger. The drop was particularly notable in the Flathead zone, where we received over 80 fewer observations than the previous winter. Yet the number of individuals (143) who submitted observations was the highest ever, indicating that the public and operational partners remain highly engaged with the FAC's forecasts, even in poor conditions.

The FAC team submitted 127 observations, which is typical for the most recent six seasons. During that time, the FAC has shifted to doing more fieldwork as teams of two or more forecasters. The 127 FAC observations this season represent 197 field days by FAC staff.

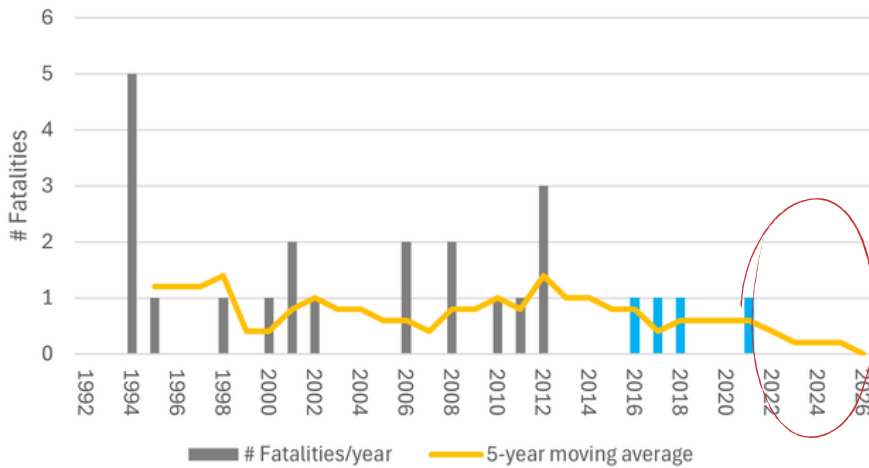
**A big THANK YOU! To each of the following people,
who submitted five or more observations during the winter:**

Ian Bartling, Mike Bussard, Adam Clark, Scott Freeman, Clare George, Kat Gebauer, Chris Gotschalk, David Kerner, Max Millington, Jeremy Primmer, Al Slader, David Steele, Lydia Willoughby



Near Misses and Accidents

Flathead Region Avalanche Fatalities, 1992-2026 Winters



During the 2025-26 winter, The FAC recorded its second highest tally of near-misses and accidents in the past eight winters. That tally included four confirmed partial or full burials and three airbag deployments. Thankfully, none of these events resulted in serious injuries or fatalities. That marks the fifth consecutive winter without a fatal avalanche accident in the FAC forecast region, the longest continuous streak since 1992.

The FAC publishes near-miss and accident reports to document what happened when things went wrong, in hopes readers can learn lessons that will keep them safer. They're not possible without the people who reported the events and corroborated details. Their contributions to the community are invaluable.

The number of fatalities per winter in the Flathead region since 1992. Grey bars show fatalities each year prior to the establishment of the FAC in the 2014-15 winter; blue bars show fatalities that have occurred since. The yellow line shows the five-year moving average of fatalities per winter.

NOTE: There have been 0 fatalities in the past 5 years.

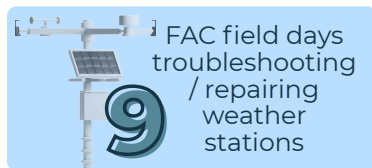
Zone	# near misses	# Caught/ Carried	# Partial/ Full burials	Instability Problem	Setting	Travel Modes
Whitefish	8	6	4 PB	Pre-JDL: 4 JDL: 4 Non-JDL: 6	7 sidecountry, 3 backcountry, 1 cabin, 1 ski area	6 ski, 4 snowboard, 4 snowmobile
Swan	0	3	1 PB, 1 FB	Pre-JDL: 0 JDL: 2 Non-JDL: 1	2 backcountry, 1 cabin	1 ski, 2 snowmobile
Flathead	0	1	0	Pre-JDL: 0 JDL: 1 Non-JDL: 0	1 backcountry	1 ski

Number of people involved in reported near-misses and accidents by Forecast Zone for the 2025-26 winter. The three instability problems are those prior to the development of the January Drought Layer Persistent Slab Problem (Nov. 1-Jan. 28), those involving the JDL Persistent Slab Problem (Jan 28-May 1), or non-JDL avalanche problems during the Jan. 28-May 1 period.

Nearly half of the season's reported near-misses and accidents (7 of 15 events) occurred in the sidecountry adjacent to Whitefish Mountain Resort. The dearth of reported incidents in the Flathead Zone likely reflects lack of use due to challenging access conditions and elevated danger.



Education



Adult Classes

Adult avalanche education remained a key part of our mission this season.

Through our partnership with FVCC, we reached:

- 116 participants
- 39 motorized students
- 77 non-motorized students.

We also presented to:

- 189 participants through free Avalanche Awareness Classes

Expanding access to avalanche education across our community.

Youth Classes

Our youth education programs reached the next generation of backcountry users through both classroom and on-snow learning.

This season:

- 618 students participated in in-person classes at Big Mountain
- 87 students joined classroom presentations, and
- 18 schools participated

“Going to the mountain was my favorite part. I liked being outside and learning about snow and avalanches because I ski and it feels useful.”

Addison H.
8th Grader from C Falls

NRSAW

The 2025 Northern Rockies Snow & Avalanche Workshop was an incredible weekend!

We welcomed:

- 90 participants from all over the northwest at Pro Night
- 260 attendees at NRSAW

Our amazing speakers shared their knowledge and passion, making for an inspiring and educational event.

Outreach

Connecting with our community beyond the classroom remains an important part of what we do.

This season included the following free outreach events:

- State of the Snowpack in Whitefish
- Scoop on Spring in Columbia Falls
- TeleFestivus in Lakeside
- 115 through Topics/SOS Classes

Creating opportunities to share knowledge, build connections, and celebrate winter backcountry culture.



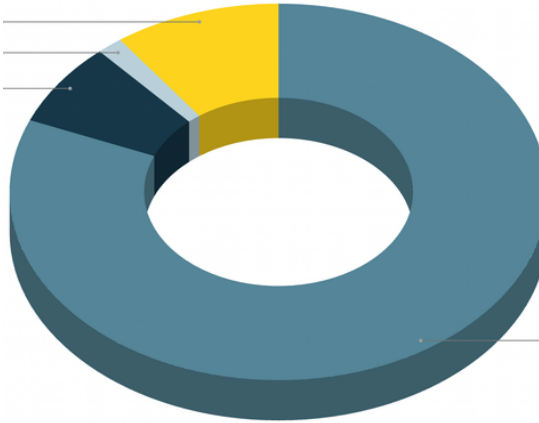


Financials



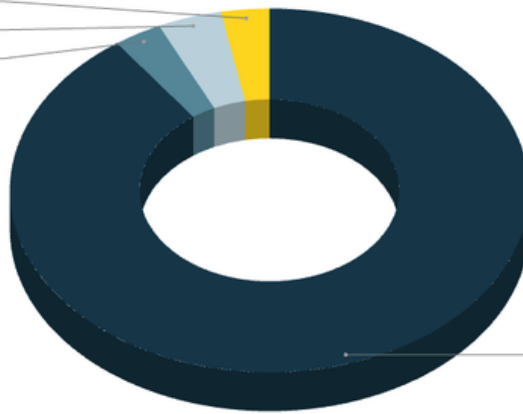
Income

United States Forest Service 10%
MT Recreational Trails Program 2%
Glacier National Park 7%



Flathead National Forest
81%

Field Gear, Training 3%
Snowmobiles 4%
Vehicles 3%



Expenses

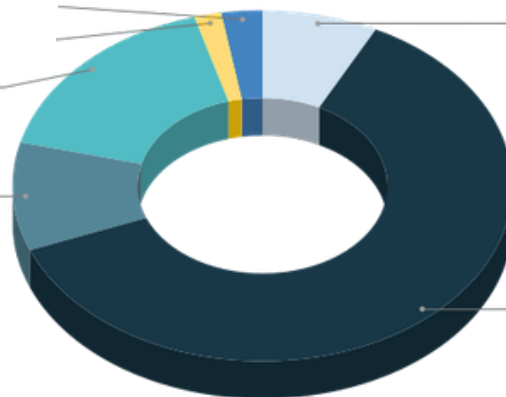
Doesn't include contributions by USFS for office space, internet, etc.

Staffing 90%



Income

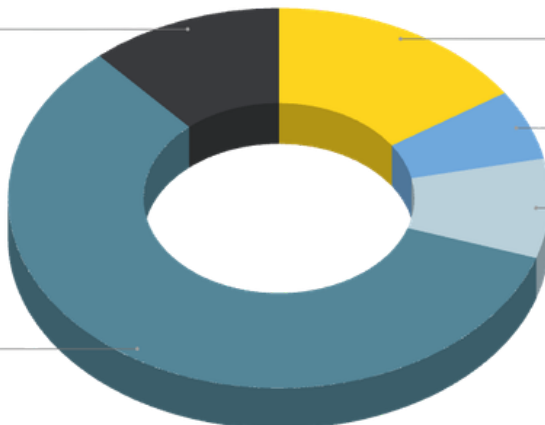
Merchandise 3%
Individual Donations 2%
Corporate Sponsors 17%
Educational Events 10%



Program Tuition 7%

Grants 61%

Admin & Office Expenses 11%



Forest Service Program Support 16%

Marketing & Communications 6%

Educational Events 8%

Education Programs 58%

Expenses



Gratitude

Operational Partners



Granting Partners



2025/2026 Sponsors



AMERICAN
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thank you



Community Donors

\$500+

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Looking Forward



During the season, we tend to focus on what's happening or what's just ahead—which avalanche problem to list, where to do field work ahead of a storm, what needs packed for the weekend's avalanche education class, or whom to contact regarding a sponsorship or donation.

At times when the avalanche danger is elevated, that focus is accompanied by a quiet, lurking discomfort. What happens this weekend when the weather clears and people rush to the mountains, yet conditions remain dangerous? Will someone have a serious accident?

The 2025-26 winter saw a prolonged period of that discomfort. In late February, it seemed we were hearing almost-daily reports of near-misses, air-bag deployments, and burials. In March, when those tapered off, we got regular observations of natural avalanches breaking hundreds of feet wide and several meters deep and producing unsurvivable amounts of debris.

The FAC and FOFAC teams breathed a collective “whew” of relief when the season ended without a serious avalanche-related injury or fatality. That is, we think, partially due to the result of our daily focus on identifying and communicating avalanche dangers, as well as teaching people how to avoid them.

Informed decisions matter. Such as the choice that keeps a rider off a dangerous slope. The decision that protects someone from tumbling in an avalanche.

Lastly, so too did the community that contributes to Flathead Avalanche's programs and works keep each other safe, day in and day out. Thank you. Let's do it again next winter.

