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PRESS RELEASE

Mt. Tom avalanche kills 2 skiers and injures one other

Director
Nate Greenberg

President
Walter Rosenthal

Secretary
Howie Schwartz

Treasurer
Robert 'SP' Parker

Forecaster
Sue Burak

On Saturday, March 26th, 2005 the Eastern Sierra saw its first two avalanche fatalities in almost 10 years. This is a tragic accident that is deeply affecting members of the local community. While it is extremely important that we get information out to the public quickly and effectively, it needs to be done with care to assure that all the details are accurately reported. We appreciate your help in this matter.

Background

Mt. Tom (13,652') sits as one of the landmark peaks of the Eastern Sierra, just west of Bishop, Ca. One of its most popular ski descents is Elderberry Canyon, a long glacially carved canyon that swoops from the North Ridge of Mt. Tom near 12,000 ft. to the mouth of the canyon at 5,400 ft. near the Pine Creek road outside Rovana.

From March 19th to March 25th, the eastern Sierra received 5-8 inches of water with snowfall amounts of 66 inches recorded at Mammoth Mountain Ski Area (Please see <http://patrol.mammothmountain.com>). Wind loading associated with these storms created extremely unstable snowpack conditions with many skier triggered slides reported from both the backcountry and the ski area.

Accident Report

A group of 7 skiers, comprised of Eastside locals and visitors, climbed Elderberry Canyon on Mt. Tom on Saturday, March 26th. The group planned on skinning the canyon to the North Ridge, where they would ski back down the way they came up. By 1:30pm they had reached the ridgeline (right around 12,000') at the top of the canyon and were beginning their descent. The first two skiers safely skied a broad east facing bowl-like portion of the canyon, just below the ridge. The remaining portion of the party waited in a safe zone above as the 3rd and 4th skiers entered the slope. Just after doing so, the entire slope released on them in a soft-slab avalanche. Crown sizes varied from approximately 2 to 4 ft. In addition, one of the flanks ran from the top of the bowl down the south ridge approximately 700 to 1,000 ft. Both skiers were caught and carried down the slope with the large amount of debris about 1,500' before being buried on a large bench-like moraine.

After seeing the slide, the remaining 3 skiers above quickly hurried down to begin the rescue. Upon doing so, they caused a second avalanche, slightly higher and to the north of the first slide. This slide caught all 3 skiers. One was able to escape, one rode the slide, staying on top for roughly 1,000' and a third escaped after a short distance after breaking her fibula.

Once the 4 uninjured skiers reached the deposition zone, a beacon search began. The first victim was recovered within 20 minutes. The second victim was buried under 3.5 meters of debris and took about an hour to reach. CPR was attempted. One victim is a middle-aged male from Bishop, Ca, the other a middle-aged female visiting from Montana. Names are not being released at this time.

No crown profile or formal avalanche observations were made at the time of recovery. A large number of natural releases had occurred on all aspects over a wide range of elevations in Elderberry Canyon. It is also important to note the amount of snowfall over the past few days, as well as the strong ridge-top winds which had transported a large amount of snow into the canyon.

As more information becomes available, we will release it. For more information on this accident, please contact Nate Greenberg at the info below.