

## Avalanche Details

- **Location:** Gunsight Peak, McCormick Creek, Selkirk Mountains
- **State:** Idaho
- **Date:** 2024/03/01
- **Time:** 3:00 PM
- **Summary Description:** 1 snowmobiler caught, buried, and killed.
- **Primary Activity:** Snowmobiler
- **Primary Travel Mode:** Snowmobile
- **Location Setting:** Backcountry

Number	Avalanche	Site
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Caught:</b> 1</li><li>• <b>Partially Buried, Non-Critical:</b> 0</li><li>• <b>Partially Buried, Critical:</b> 0</li><li>• <b>Fully Buried:</b> 1</li><li>• <b>Injured:</b> 0</li><li>• <b>Killed:</b> 1</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Type:</b> HS</li><li>• <b>Trigger:</b> AM - Snowmobile</li><li>• <b>Trigger (subcode):</b> u - An unintentional release.</li><li>• <b>Size - Relative to Path:</b> R3</li><li>• <b>Size - Destructive Force:</b> D2</li><li>• <b>Sliding Surface:</b> I – Old / new</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Slope Aspect:</b> E</li><li>• <b>Site Elevation:</b> 6300 ft</li><li>• <b>Slope Angle:</b> 38 degrees (estimate)</li><li>• <b>Slope Characteristic:</b> Mostly open</li></ul>

## Avalanche Comments

On Friday, March 9th, at approximately 3:00pm a snowmobiler unintentionally triggered a hard slab avalanche while riding up an open, east-facing, wind-loaded slope. The avalanche started at 6,700' feet just below Gunsight Peak, in the headwaters of McCormick Creek (Fig. 2). Gunsight Peak is a prominent peak in the Selkirk Mountains of North Idaho. The avalanche was a large, hard slab that broke near the storm snow / old snow interface (HS-AMu-R3/D2-I). The avalanche broke approximately 2-3 feet deep, 950' wide and traveled 300-400 vertical feet (Fig. 3).

## Snowpack and weather Summary

The 2023-24 winter weather, to date, generally followed an El Nino cycle. Overall weather proved above average temperatures and below average precipitation. The Idaho Panhandle Avalanche Center (IPAC) issues full avalanche advisories and danger ratings twice a week, scheduled on Tuesdays and Fridays. For the 23-24 winter season, IPAC began issuing avalanche forecasts December 12, 2023. The month of December was characterized by very low snowpack heights. Avalanche danger ratings for the Selkirks/Cabinets Zone were Low for all December and early January 2024. Avalanche hazard rose to High with heavy snowfall January 8 - 11th. Significantly cold weather immediately followed with near record lows.

The rest of January had below average snowfall. Late January to early February saw warm temperatures and rain at all elevations. Once refrozen on February 3rd, the widespread rain crust bridged the underlying snowpack. Slow intermittent snowfall followed with Moderate danger ratings. Wind and new snow instabilities were isolated above the February 3rd rain crust. The mountain snowpack remained around 65% of average. IPAC's Selkirks/Cabinets Zone danger ratings were Low on February 20th and 23rd. A rapid change occurred Sunday, February 25 to Friday, March 1st (day of incident). Intense snowfall and accompanied strong winds were concentrated over short time periods. A quick passing storm hit Sunday, raising danger to High on Monday (an unscheduled full forecast for that day).

A Considerable danger rating was issued on Tuesday the 27th with a break in weather. A weather system set in Tuesday night through Thursday. SNOTEL sites in the Selkirk Range, Hidden Lake (elevation 5040', 22 miles North of incident site) and Schweitzer Basin (elevation 6090', 14 miles South of incident site), recorded 2.7 inches and 3.5 inches respectively, of snow water equivalent (SWE) during the 30-hour period. Tuesday night to Thursday morning. IPAC issued another extra unscheduled full avalanche forecast for High danger rating and accompanying Avalanche Warning on Thursday, February 29th (leap day). Two IPAC technicians collected field observations (Fig. 1) on Thursday for the Friday avalanche forecast. Storm weather continued into Thursday night. The Avalanche Warning was extended through Friday, March 1st with a High danger rating; the forecast listed Wind Slab and Storm Slab as 2 separate avalanche problem types. Friday morning, March 1st, saw SNOTEL 24-hour SWE totals of 2.6 inches at Hidden Lake and 1.9 inches at Schweitzer Basin. Snowfall and winds slowed down bringing a break in the storm during the day on Friday.

## Accident Summary

On the morning of March 1st, 4 snowmobilers (snowmobiler 1 and three friends) headed out for a day of riding in the Selkirk Mountains. Residing in the Pack River drainage just a couple of miles from the trailhead, Snowmobiler 1 had 25-plus years of riding experience in the area. At the trailhead, the group discussed the day's plan and assessed the avalanche danger, taking into account the Avalanche Warning issued by the Idaho Panhandle Avalanche Center, which had designated the danger level as High. Deciding to err on the side of caution, the group committed to avoiding avalanche-prone terrain.

Leaving the Pack River drainage, the party progressed up McCormick Creek into the Fault Lake area—a vast, open basin. Once in the upper basin, the group exercised a conservative approach, steering clear of slopes prone to avalanches. Around 3 PM, two members headed back towards the trailhead, leaving Snowmobilers 1 and 2 in the upper basin, intending to continue sledding for a while longer.

Approximately five minutes after the group split, Snowmobiler 1 ascended a slope above them to high mark, triggering an avalanche while turning at the top (Fig. 6). The 54-year-old rider was caught, separated from his sled, and buried about 4-5 feet deep. He ended up roughly 75 feet from the toe of the avalanche. Prior to heading for the high mark, Snowmobiler 1 instructed Snowmobiler 2 to "Keep eyes on me." Positioned at the bottom of the slope in the runout path he decided to keep his snowmobile running and positioned across the fall line. Snowmobiler 2 witnessed the initiation of the avalanche by Snowmobiler 1, then turned his sled downhill to escape.

As he descended, attempting to outrun the avalanche, he collided with a tree and fell off his sled. Although he feared being hit by the slide, the avalanche fortunately stopped 30 feet uphill from his position. He was wearing an airbag pack but didn't deploy it amidst the confusion. After the avalanche halted, he regained his footing, he ascended to the toe of the avalanche, and initiated a search. Quickly detecting a beacon signal, he followed it and was subsequently able to probe and dig down to Snowmobiler 1 and excavate his head and chest. Snowmobiler 1 was not breathing and exhibited no signs of life.

## Rescue Summary

Snowmobiler 2 was the only person to witness the avalanche. After he found snowmobiler 1, he tried several phone and radio calls to the remainders of the group (who headed out just before the accident). Unfortunately, cell service is spotty between the accident site and the trailhead, and the other riders didn't get his message that an accident had occurred until they were driving out the Pack River Road. At this point they called Snowmobiler 2 (who was still on site) After an explanation of the accident, and the state of snowmobiler 1, they asked him to head down while there was still light.

Snowmobiler 2 reluctantly turned his attention to getting himself out. He made his way back to his snowmobile which was still stuck and pinned against a tree. He had to use a saw to free his snowmobile from the trees. Fortunately, the machine remained operable, and he was able to return to the trailhead.

The Boundary County Sheriff determined due that going back that night for the body recovery was too risky due to the weather and avalanche conditions. On the morning of March 2 Boundary County Sheriff started to formulate a plan for the body recovery. Approximately 20 inches of snow had fallen since the accident, potentially increasing the avalanche danger, creating overhead hazard, and covering the avalanche site. The Sheriff decided to send a team of snowmobilers in on the morning of March 2<sup>nd</sup>. The team was made up of members of the original group. The group was familiar with the terrain and knew exactly where the accident occurred and are experienced snowmobilers. They felt confident in being able to return to the site and carry out the recovery mission safely. The team left the trailhead at approximately 10AM, accessed the site about an hour later and returned safely to the trailhead with Snowmobiler 1 at about 9PM.

## Comments

The deceased was a local USFS Engine captain, a co-worker and friend to many of the IPAC staff. He was an ambassador for snowmobiling in the local community, had attended avalanche awareness courses and mentored many local riders. Many of us have recreated and learned a lot from him through the years. He was very involved with the local community and leaves behind a big legacy as well as a loving family, friends and USFS coworkers. He will be missed dearly.

Our goal is to honor our lost friend's legacy by describing this and all avalanche incidents as accurately as possible. We offer this description to help our community better understand what happened and to help others understand avalanche accidents and avoid them in the future.

The two riders intended to avoid avalanche terrain on this day as they understood conditions to be unusually dangerous. That final high mark started on a shallow slope that gets progressively steeper. The point of trigger was approximately 37-40 degrees in steepness, which is the sweet spot for avalanche starting zones.

Although the group had been careful to stay out of harm's way all morning this final decision went against the plan. Snowmobiler 2 described the mood of the group to be "stoked" and having a great day. It's likely that the "stoke" of the day contributed to the quick decision that proved to be fateful.

This accident also highlights how important equipment can be to our survival. Had Snowmobiler 2's machine been inoperable, it would have been more of a dire situation. The trailhead was a 6-7-mile journey through deep snow with multiple creek crossings. Small equipment failures can have a huge impact on your plans and should be considered when choosing your gear, route and partners.

Figure 1- Data pit, 2.29.24, Approximately 8 miles from the accident site on the same ridgeline  
IPAC Avalanche Technician- Micah Krmpotich

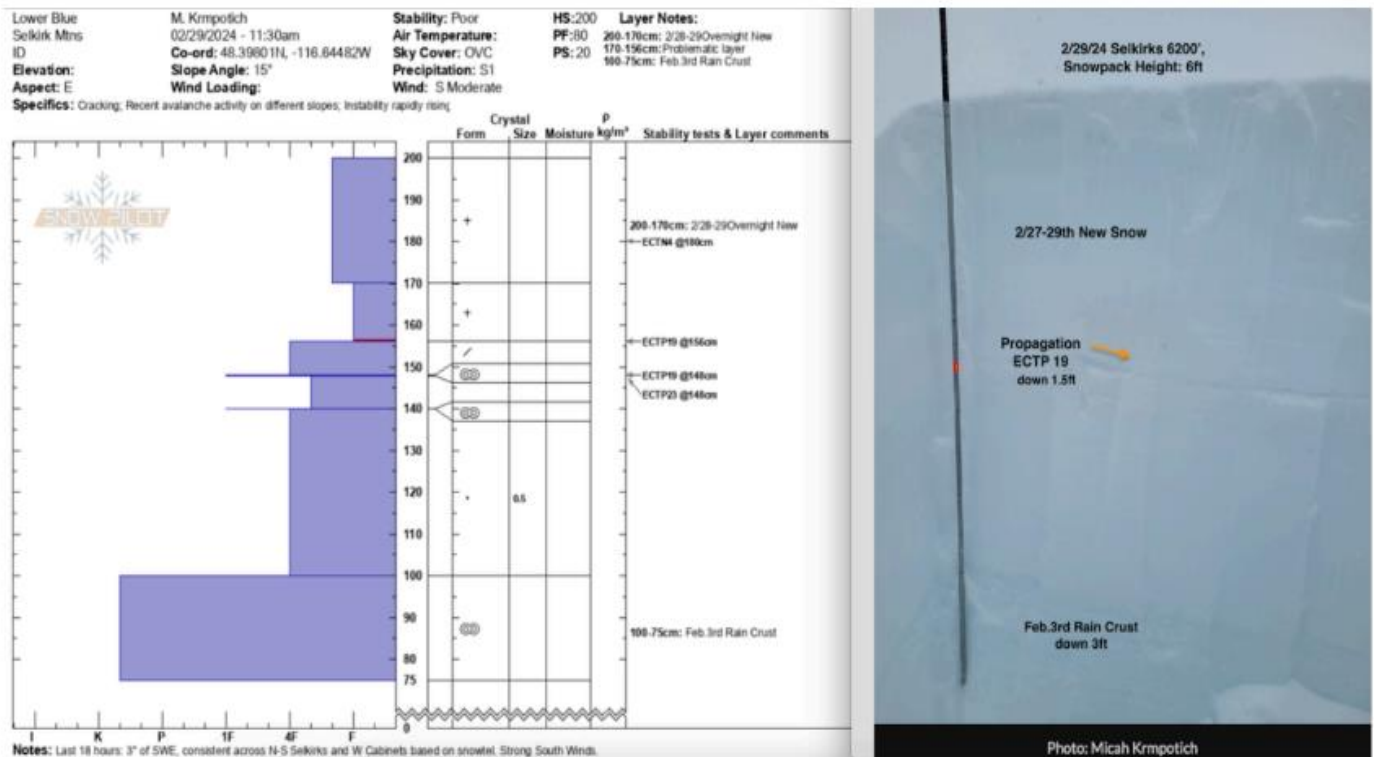


Figure 2- TOPO map showing location along the Selkirk Crest



Figure 3- Google earth image showing location ( Red- crown, yellow- flanks and toe)

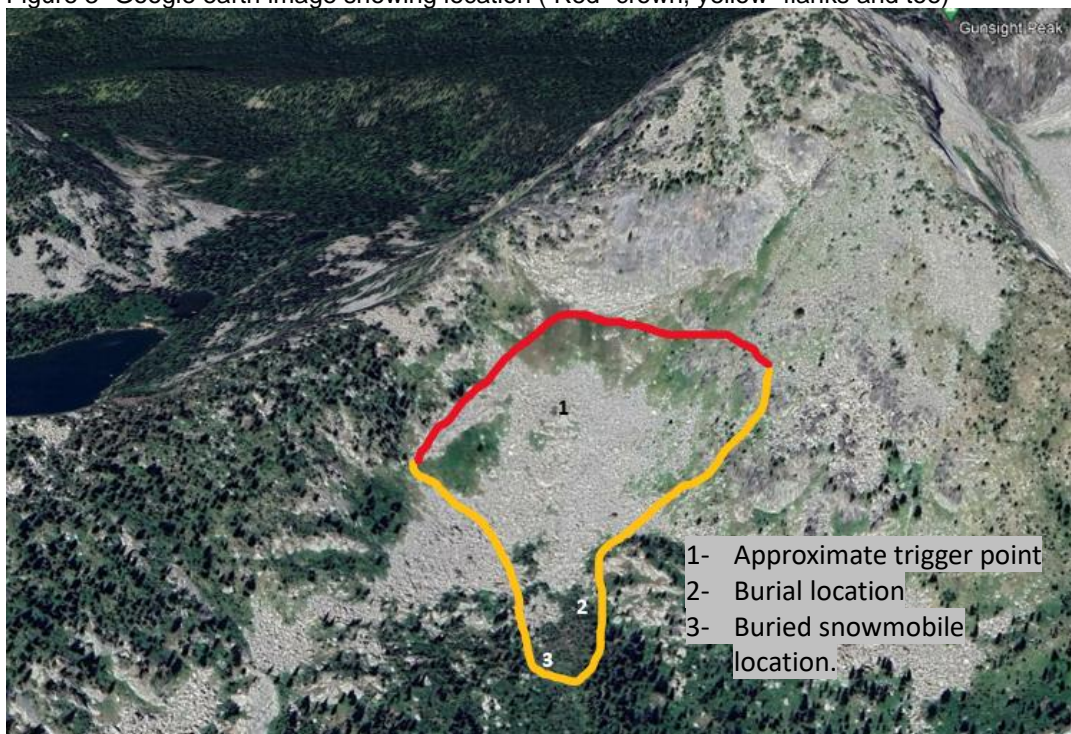




Figure 4- Backcountry OnX map showing slope steepness shading (Red- fracture line, yellow- flanks and toe)

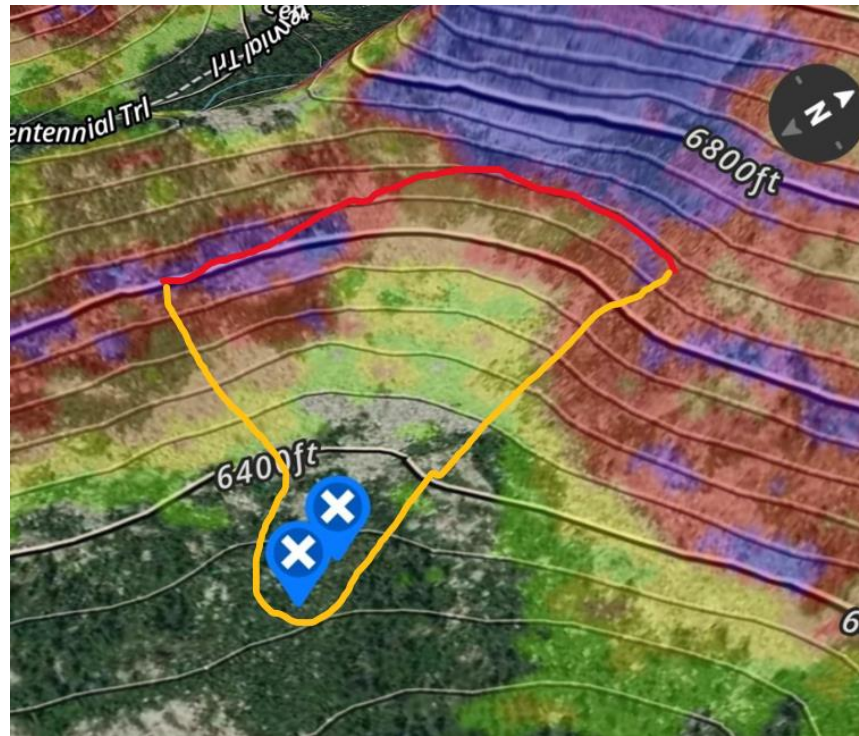


Figure 5-Photo 3.2.24 Looking at the left side of the fracture line from the debris.



Figure 6- Photo 3.2.24 Looking uphill at the fracture line (Red- fracture line, yellow- approximate path of snowmobiler 1's travel)

