

depth in the runout area.

Stairs Gulch is a huge northwest-facing gully that has run even larger in the past. On several occasions it has reached the highway in the bottom of the canyon, a vertical drop of some 4,500 feet. The steepness of the starting zone varies from 35° to 45°, and its bowl-shaped catchment area allows snow to be trapped from all wind directions. All these factors taken together make this a highly erratic and dangerous avalanche path.

Comments

Deep, isothermal snowpacks in late

spring are ripe for deep-instability avalanches. It is common for these to run in a piecemeal fashion, increasing the possibility of several avalanches down the same track over a short time interval. Rescuers should be aware of this capricious quirk of avalanches and should always be prepared to make a hasty escape. A timely warning prevented this rescue effort from becoming a tragedy within itself.

This incident vividly emphasizes the importance of a "lookout" for avalanche rescues. Rescues conducted without a specifically posted guard are risky at best.