

MOUNT NEBO, SOUTH OF SPANISH FORK, UTAH

19990129b

January 29, 1999

One snowmobiler caught, buried, and killed

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS

There was little snowfall in the Wasatch Mountains in December and early January. The snow on the ground faceted, forming a layer of weak snow up to one foot thick. A major storm caused an avalanche cycle between January 19 and 21. Many slopes in the Mount Nebo area, in the southern end of Utah's Wasatch Range, avalanched during the storm. A small storm on January 26 partially filled in the crowns.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

Paul Jepson (31) and Wade Hanks were riding powerfully-modified snowmobiles on east-facing slopes to the north of Mount Nebo. They were highmarking slopes steeper than 40 degrees. Hanks was working on his sled, watching Jepson highmark, when the avalanche released just before 15:30. The avalanche caught Jepson and swept him into a stand of trees. His watch stopped at 15:28.

Terrain trap

RESCUE SUMMARY

The pair did not have avalanche rescue equipment. Hanks called 911 from his cell phone at 15:55. It took Hanks about 45 minutes to find his friend. Jepson was in a treed area and partially buried. He appeared to have suffered severe trauma. Hanks attempted CPR with no response.

No rescue
equipment

AVALANCHE DATA

This was a hard slab avalanche, triggered by a snowmobiler. It broke in old, faceted snow formed during the December and early January dry spell. The avalanche was 1,200 feet wide, two feet deep, and ran 800 vertical feet. It snapped and broke six-inch diameter trees.

Persistent Slab
avalanche

COMMENTS

About one quarter of avalanche victims die from trauma. A very large avalanche—like this one, which snapped trees—can inflict significant damage to a human body. Being swept into trees increases the consequence of the avalanche. It is quite possible that Jepson would not have survived this accident, even if he and Hanks had avalanche rescue equipment. However, recreating in avalanche terrain without rescue equipment reduces your chance of survival.