

Avalanche center is digging in to find dangers

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

JOSEPH — Victor McNeil travels the backcountry of Northeastern Oregon with a shovel, but he uses the tool for a purpose more profound than freeing a stuck rig.

Saving lives, potentially. McNeil is director of the Wallowa Avalanche Center, based in Joseph.

The organization, founded in 2009, monitors the region for avalanche danger that can pose a risk to skiers, snowboarders, snowshoers and snowmobile riders who venture into the region's untrammeled mountains.

A vital part of the center's work is digging pits in the snow — hence McNeil's ubiquitous shovel — to study the various layers in the snowpack and identify dangers, such as weak or



Victor McNeil, director of the Wallowa Avalanche Center, uses a snowmobile to travel into the backcountry of Northeastern Oregon and assess avalanche danger.

icy sections, that can greatly increase the avalanche risk.

"With avalanche forecasting, you really don't

have the full picture until you get out and get your shovel in the snow," McNeil said. "That's a huge part of

what we do."

The center issues forecasts four days each week — Thursday through Sunday — for each of the four zones in this corner of Oregon.

The center has its biggest annual fundraiser last weekend, the 10th annual Eastern Oregon Backcountry Festival at Anthony Lakes

Mountain Resort.

McNeil, who lives in La Grande with his wife, Kelly, who is an avalanche specialist with the center, said that dividing Northeastern Oregon into zones is necessary because the conditions that contribute to avalanche danger can vary widely among them.

The zones are: Northern Blue Mountains, Elkhorns, Northern Wallowas and Southern Wallowas.

That the Wallowas, a single, albeit extensive, mountain range is separated into two regions illustrates the point.

McNeil said the avalanche danger can be significantly different between the two Wallowas zones, in part because in most winters quite a bit more snow falls in the southern section of the range.

The Northern Blue Mountains aren't as lofty as the Wallowas or the Elkhorns, and thus more prone to thaws and rain during winter, which can result in much different avalanche risks than elsewhere, McNeil said.

"There's a lot of ground to cover," he said. "We want to do the best we can to get out into the field and visit all of the zones."

McNeil said the center also solicits field reports from experienced backcountry travelers.

All the information is available, for free, on the center's website: <https://www.wallowaavalanchecenter.org/>.

McNeil is the center's only salaried employee.

Other staff members, in addition to Kelly McNeil, are avalanche specialists Michael Hatch (director of the Outdoor Adventure Program at Eastern Oregon University), Tom Guthrie and Caleb Merrill.

McNeil said all the center's staff members put in a considerable amount of volunteer work, although they are reimbursed for travel and other expenses.

Growing interest in learning to recognize avalanche danger

McNeil said the center's activities, and its budget, have grown over the past four years or so.

The annual budget, which was about \$30,000, has risen to around \$45,000.

McNeil said that unlike some larger avalanche forecast operations, the Wallowa Avalanche Center doesn't receive financial support from any government agency. The center relies on fundraisers such as the Eastern Oregon Backcountry Festival, and grants and other donations.

But the biggest increase in the budget has resulted from the center's avalanche safety classes, which it started offering four years ago, McNeil said.

With more people traveling into the backcountry in winter — a trend that has accelerated during the pan-

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