Longs Pass Avalanche Fatality
January 9th, 2026

Report by Katie Warren & Payton Schiff

Incident Summary:

On January 9th, 2026, four backcountry skiers were recreating in the Longs Pass area of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, approximately 17 miles north of Cle Elum, Washington. The group skied two runs on west-facing aspects between 5300 and 6300 ft. They then moved to a generally S-facing slope at similar elevations. All four skiers stopped approximately 200 vertical feet below the ridgeline and transitioned to downhill mode below a prominent rock feature at 6300ft. At approximately 3:40 pm, Skiers 1 and 2 descended the slope one at a time and stopped on a minor, low angle rib separating two prominent gullies. Skier 3 descended almost all the way to the waiting skiers when Skier 4 began their descent. The avalanche occurred just as Skier 4 started downhill, fracturing above him at the base of the rock.

The avalanche caught and carried all four individuals, and debris flowed into both gullies. Skiers 1 and 4 were partially buried and able to self-extricate. Skiers 2 and 3 were carried approximately 300 vertical feet into the western gully. Skier 2 was almost completely buried, with only a ski exposed, and Skier 3 was fully buried. Both Skiers 2 and 3 did not survive.

Accident Details:

Location: Longs Pass, Kittitas Co, Okanogan-Wenatchee NF, WA
Date: January 9th, 2026
Time: Approximately 3:40 pm
Coordinates: 47.45039, -120.92985
Summary: 4 people caught, 3 partially buried, 1 fully buried, 2 killed
Primary Activity: Backcountry Skiing
Primary Travel Mode: Skis
Location Setting: Steep, sparsely treed terrain in the eastern Cascade Mountains

Group Information:

Number in Party: 4
Number Caught: 4
Number Partially Buried, Critical or Not-critical: 3 partial burials, 2 not-critical, 1 critical *(Not-critical means the head was exposed, Critical means the head was buried)*
Number Completely Buried: 1
Duration of Burial: 40 minutes for Skier 2, ~20 hours for Skier 3

Number Injured: 1
Number Killed: 2

Site Information:

Slope Aspect: S
Site Elevation: 6300 ft
Slope Angle: Average 38°, range 22-45°
Slope Characteristic: Steep terrain with sparse trees and exposed rocks. Rolls steeply into a convexity above a prominent rock feature. The avalanche fractured on the slope below the convex roll. The terrain then funnels into gullies in the runout.

Avalanche Information:

Type: Hard Slab (HS)
Trigger: Skier (AS_u)
Size Relative to Path: R3
Size: Destructive Force: D2.5
Bed Surface: Old Snow (O)

Dimensions:
Average Depth: 21 in (55 cm) (est.)
Maximum Depth: 30 in (75 cm) (est. maximum)
Width: 400 ft (120 m) (est.)
Vertical Fall: 1000 ft (300 m) (est.)
Slab Characteristics: Decomposing Fragments, 1 Finger to 1 Finger+ Hard
Weak Layer Characteristics: Rounded Grains/ Rounding Faceted Grains, .5 mm, 1Finger Hard
Bed Surface Characteristics: Melt-Freeze Crust, Pencil Hard

Terrain Trap: Yes
Terrain Trap Type: Gullies and trees
Comments: The avalanche flowed into two separate, sparsely treed, narrow gullies.

Avalanche Forecast:
Avalanche Forecast Center: Northwest Avalanche Center (NWAC)
Avalanche Danger: Considerable at middle and upper elevations, Moderate at lower elevations
Forecast URL:
https://nwac.us/avalanche-forecast/#/forecast/8/177395 (forecast valid on Thursday, January 8th)

https://nwac.us/avalanche-forecast/#/forecast/8/177477 (forecast valid on Friday, January 9th)
Comments: The group read the avalanche forecast valid for Thursday, January 8th, 2026. They had not read an updated avalanche forecast valid for Friday, January 9th, 2026, the day of the accident.

Avalanche Summary:

The 4th skier to descend likely triggered the avalanche on his first turn down the slope. The slab was much thinner in this area near the prominent rock features where the group transitioned and began downhill. In wind drifted areas along a subridge on the western portion of the path, as well as in a minor concave gully near the slide's eastern flank, the slab was thicker. The avalanche failed on a melt-freeze crust from a rain event in early January (Image 1). A few rounding faceted grains could be found above the crust in a crown profile, but they did not create a distinguishable layer. To the east of the rock feature, the slab fractured directly across the slope, terminating at another section of exposed rocks (Image 2 and 3). Along the western portion of the crown, the slab broke in a zigzag pattern, reaching exposed rocks along the lower-angle subridge. The sheltered areas below the starting zone contained softer snow, likely influenced by warming. As the hard slab debris (Image 4) flowed downslope, it picked up this moist snow, which may have helped it travel farther down the narrow gullies below. From what could be observed, the debris did not break any large, living trees.

Backcountry Avalanche Forecast

The last avalanche forecast that the group read was valid for Thursday, January 8th. It was Considerable at middle and upper elevations, and Moderate at lower elevations. The forecast identified that small to large wind slabs were likely on all aspects at middle and upper elevations, and small to large storm slabs were possible on all aspects at lower and middle elevations.

The avalanche forecast valid on Friday, January 9th, was Considerable at middle and upper elevations, and Moderate at lower elevations. The forecast identified that small to large wind slab avalanches on all aspects were likely at middle and upper elevations. The forecast also identified that small, wet loose avalanches were possible on southern aspects at middle and lower elevations.

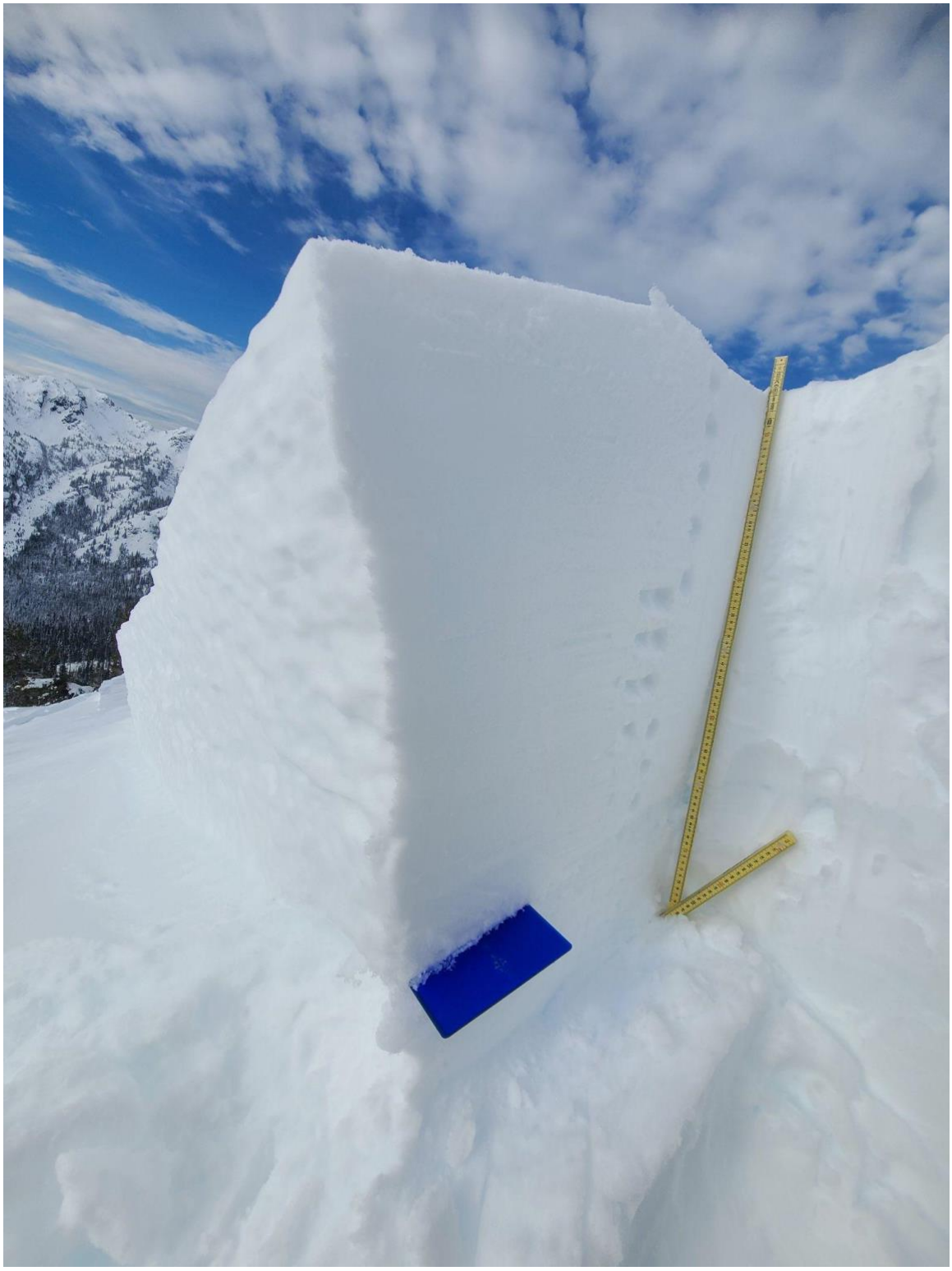

Image 1: View from the crown profile location looking east towards the rest of the crown line and starting zone.

Image 2: A view of the crown and starting zone. The avalanche was triggered directly below the prominent rock in the upper, center-right of the crown.

Image 3: View from the crown profile location looking east towards the rest of the crown line and starting zone.

Image 4: Example of the large size and hardness of the avalanche debris.

Snowpack Summary:

A widespread and well-documented crust formed at the snow surface during a warming event from January 2nd to 3rd, 2026. The Northwest Avalanche Center referred to this crust as the 1/3 crust in daily avalanche forecasts. In much of the forecast region, it was created by rain and became harder and more supportive at higher elevations after freezing. This layer was initially buried by a few inches of snow on Sunday, January 3rd. The following week, a series of storms beginning on Tuesday, January 5th, brought significant snow totals to the western portion of the East Central zone. This cold, low-density snow was accompanied by strong to extreme ridgeline winds, primarily from the southwest. This buried the 1/3 crust with an additional 1.5 ft of snow in the nearby Salmon La Sac drainage. Unfortunately, there was no weather or snowpack data specific to the Teanaway area in the week leading up to the incident.

On January 7th, an NWAC Forecaster traveling in the Salmon La Sac drainage experienced isolated cracking and collapsing in wind-loaded terrain on north and east aspects. Between January 7th and 9th, multiple wind and storm slab avalanches were observed throughout the Washington Cascades. A few notable slides failed on the 1/3 crust in wind-affected terrain. This included one at Mission Ridge and one in the Icicle drainage of the East Central zone and one in the nearby Stevens Pass zone, where a backcountry snowboarder was caught and carried. These three avalanches had not yet been reported when the avalanche forecast was published on the evening of Wednesday, January 7th. Snowpack tests throughout the week did not indicate signs of instability associated with the 1/3 crust.

Terrain:

The terrain is subalpine, with complex ridgelines and significant exposure to wind and sun. Sparse alpine tree species, such as whitebark pine, are found near the start zone, while the remainder of the avalanche path is more heavily treed with other conifers. The main ridgeline runs northwest to southeast, and a subridge drops along the west flank of the slide path running from northeast to southwest. These ridgelines form a steep, slightly concave bowl, exposed to wind loading from multiple directions.

The starting zone contains slope angles of 38-40 degrees and is characterized by steep exposed rocks with minimal trees or other vegetation. The avalanche path quickly funnels into two steep gullies, separated by a low-angle rib. Both gullies have steep side walls and trees within the flow path. These two gullies eventually rejoin lower in the terrain (Image 5).

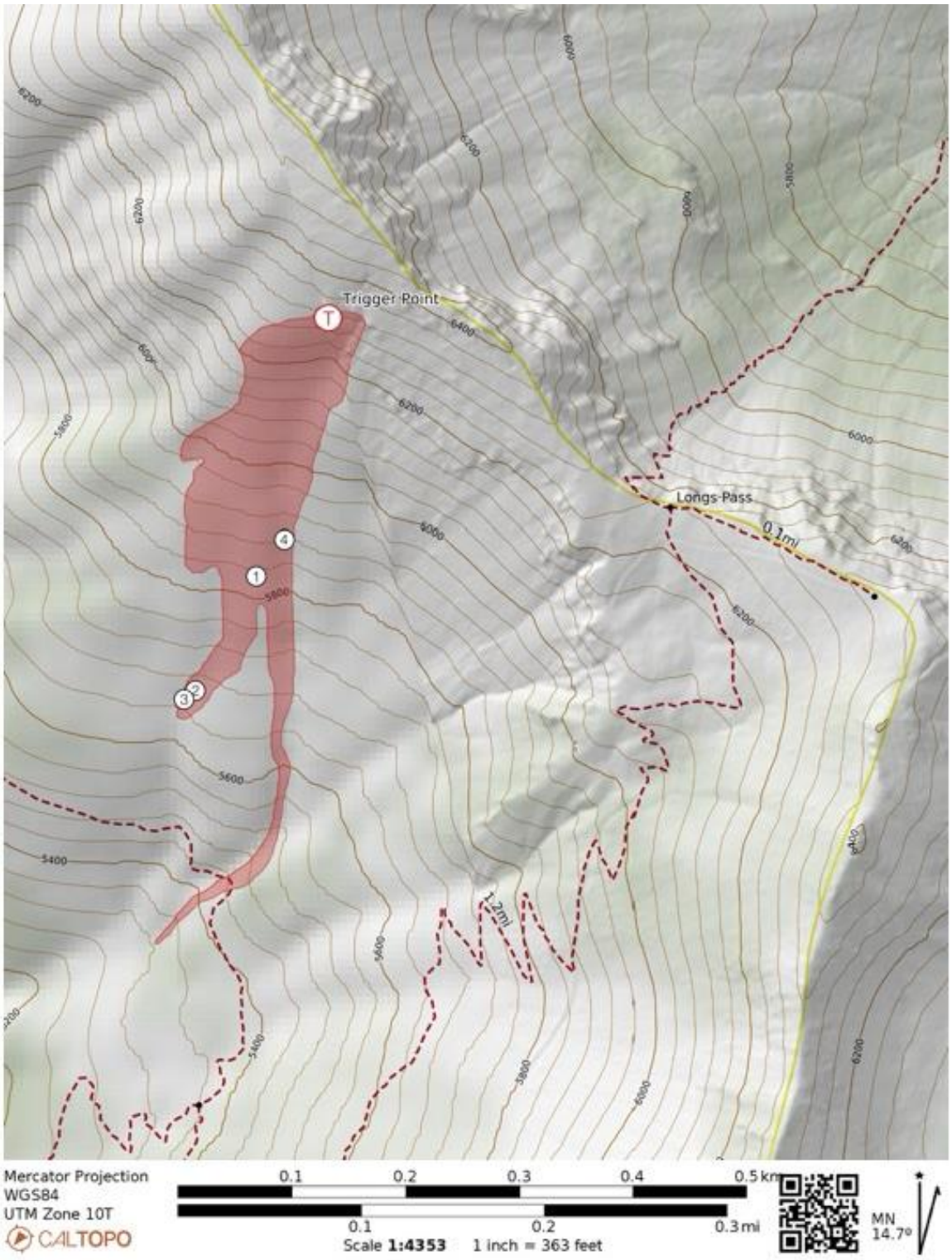

Image 5: Topographic map of January 9th, 2026, avalanche accident. The location where the avalanche was triggered (T), and the burial locations of skiers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are all shown.

Events Leading to the Avalanche:

On Thursday, January 8th, 2026, four backcountry skiers met in the morning at the 29-Pines Campground in order to access a small backcountry hut at the DeRoux Campground on the North Fork Teanaway River Road. Before leaving cell coverage, they read the NWAC avalanche forecast (valid for January 8th) and performed a group avalanche transceiver check. One member reported an “E22” error message on his transceiver, indicating a nearby metal object. He moved away from nearby vehicles, which cleared the error message. The group then left on snowmobiles for the hut. That day, the team skied low-angle, treed terrain on east aspects just north of the campground. They stayed overnight at the hut and lacked cell phone coverage or internet access to check the updated avalanche forecast.

On the morning of Friday, January 9th, the group used a satellite communication device to obtain an updated weather forecast before traveling by snowmobile farther up Teanaway River Road to the Esmerelda Trailhead (Image 6). They left the trailhead on skis to recreate in the Longs Pass Area. While ascending, the party completed a snow profile on a west aspect at approximately 5600 ft and did not identify any layers of concern. The group then skied two runs on west facing aspects between 5,300 and 6,300 ft. They reported a mild, sunny day with minimal winds.

Accident Summary:

After their first two runs in nearby terrain, the group shifted to a south aspect at similar elevations. While ascending along the western edge of the slope, they noted that the area was significantly more scoured with a hard, wind-textured snow surface. All four skiers stopped approximately 200 vertical feet below the ridgeline, just underneath a prominent rock feature, and transitioned to downhill mode. At approximately 3:40 pm, Skiers 1 and 2 descended the slope one at a time and stopped on a minor, low-angle rib between the two prominent gullies. Skier 3 had traveled most of the way to where the others were stopped when Skier 4 began his descent. The avalanche occurred just as Skier 4 began moving downhill, fracturing at the base of the prominent rock at 6300 ft.

The avalanche caught and carried all four skiers. Debris from the slide split and flowed into both prominent gullies, reaching a maximum vertical fall of approximately 1000 ft. Skier 4 was buried up to his knees near the upper extent of the debris (Image 7). Skier 1 was carried approximately 50 vertical feet down the rib and attempted to deploy his avalanche airbag, but was unsuccessful. He came to rest partially buried with a significant knee injury. Skiers 2 and 3 were carried approximately 300 vertical feet into the western gully. One (Skier 3) was fully buried, and the other (Skier 2) was almost completely buried, with only a part of a ski visible.

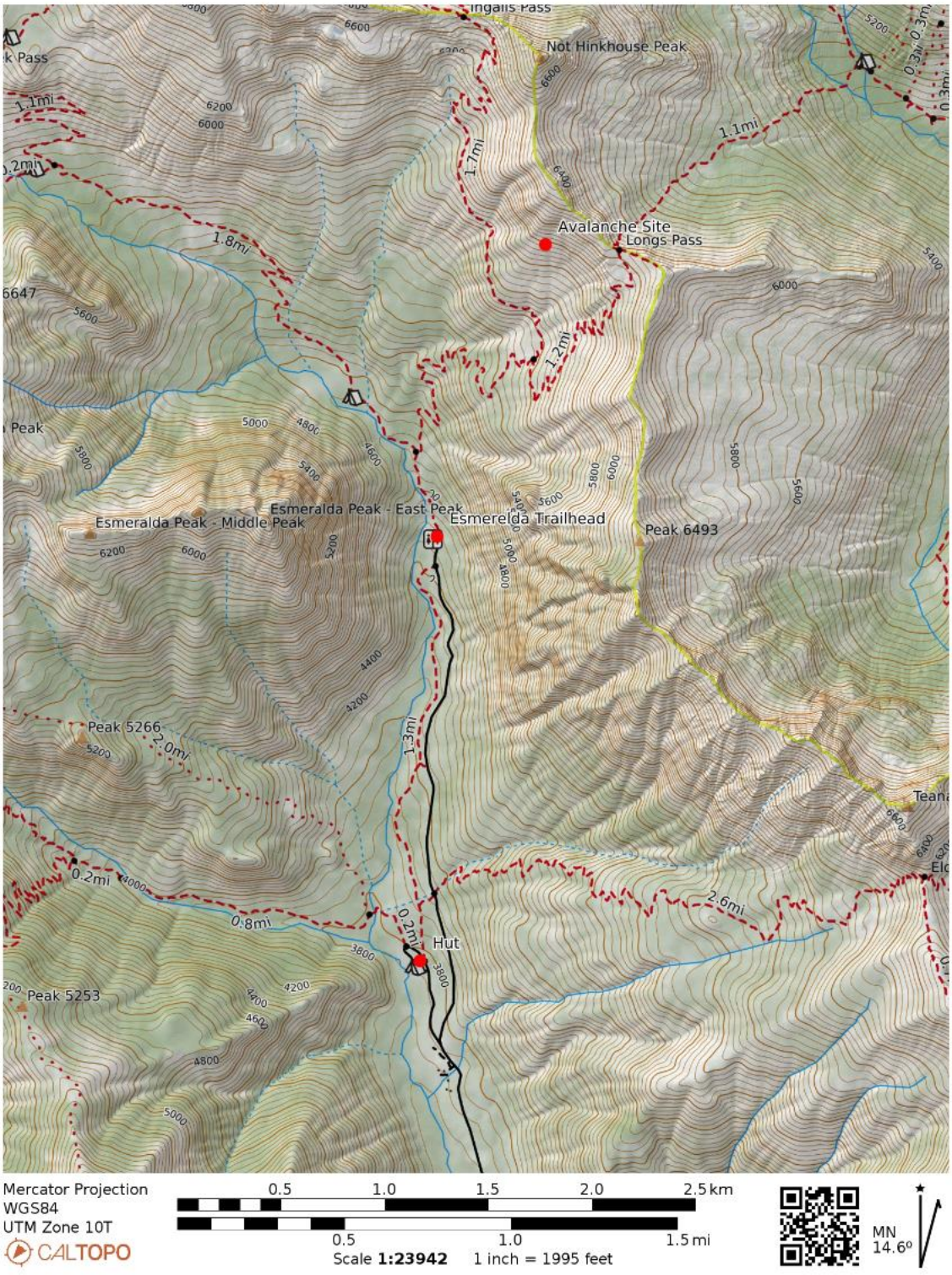

Image 6: Topographic map showing the location of the hut, Esmerelda Trailhead, and accident site.

Image 7: View uphill towards the crown from the partial burial location of Skier 4 in the eastern (skier's left) gully.

Rescue Summary:

Skiers 1 and 4 immediately began extricating themselves from the debris and were close enough to talk to each other. Skier 4 removed his buried skis and began a transceiver search on foot, traveling downhill. He returned shortly after starting the search to recover his skis in order to move through the debris more efficiently. A knee injury made it difficult for Skier 1 to move downhill, so he began searching the debris moving uphill. Skier 4 picked up an inconsistent signal approximately 50 m away and then saw Skier 2's ski on the surface. The transceiver signal became consistent at 30m, leading towards the exposed ski. They found that the ski was still attached to Skier 2's boot and began digging. Skier 2 was buried vertically, approximately 5ft deep, with his head down. It took approximately 40 minutes from the initial avalanche to reach his airway. Rescuers then performed CPR for 20-30 minutes. An unsuccessful attempt to send an emergency satellite message from Skier 4's cellphone was also made during this time. At approximately 4:40 pm, they used a satellite communication device to notify Kittitas County Search and Rescue (SAR) of the incident.

While CPR was still underway, Skier 1 continued a transceiver search to locate the other member of the party. However, he consistently received an error code on his transceiver. After CPR was discontinued, Skier 4 joined the search for Skier 3 but also reported issues obtaining a signal with his transceiver. Due to limited daylight, the prolonged burial of Skier 3, and the risk of an extended evacuation due to Skier 1's injuries, the pair left the accident site at around 5:00 pm. They connected with members of the Kittitas County SAR team at the De Roux Campground and were transported back to their vehicles at the 29-Pines Campground.

On Saturday, January 10, 2026, Kittitas County SAR, avalanche dog teams, and NWAC Forecasters returned to the accident location. The SAR teams located an avalanche transceiver signal from Skier 3 and extricated him at approximately 11:50 am. He was fully buried 3 ft deep and head downhill about 30 linear ft below Skier 2 (Image 8 and 9). His avalanche airbag had not been deployed. Both victims were transported from the accident site by King County SAR Helicopter technicians at approximately 12:30 pm.

Image 8: View uphill in the western (skier's right) gully approximately 100 ft upslope from the burial location of Skier 3.

Image 9: View uphill in the western (skier's right) gully from the approximate burial location of Skiers 2 and 3.

Comments:

All of the fatal avalanche incidents are tragic events. We do our best to describe each accident to help the people involved and the community as a whole better understand them. We offer the following comments in the hope that they will help others avoid future avalanche accidents.

Avalanche Rescue Equipment:

Avalanche Transceivers: The group carried appropriate avalanche rescue gear. However, they experienced issues while searching with their avalanche transceivers. It was likely due to either electromagnetic interference and/or the age of the devices. This ultimately prevented Skiers 1 and 4 from locating Skier 3. Electromagnetic interference can occur when other electronic or metallic objects interfere with the effective transmission or reception of a transceiver signal. Recent research on this issue has demonstrated methods for identifying and mitigating the problem. These include maintaining an appropriate distance between a transceiver and electronics, removing potential sources of interference, turning off other electronic devices, and reducing search strip widths.

Additionally, avalanche transceivers can degrade over time. Manufacturers provide recommendations for testing, upgrading software, and replacing equipment. Many current avalanche transceivers also include software that can detect and alert users to potential electromagnetic interference.

Airbags: Two of the skiers in this accident carried avalanche airbags. Skier 1 reported attempting to deploy his airbag but was unsuccessful. Ultimately, neither traveler deployed their airbags. It is unknown whether this would have changed the outcome of this incident.

Travel Techniques:

The fact that all four members of the party were caught in the avalanche significantly complicated the rescue. Travel and terrain management techniques can help mitigate the consequences if an avalanche occurs. One such technique involves exposing only one team member to the hazard at a time, including traveling on an avalanche slope and in regrouping locations.

Snowpack Observations:

The team took the opportunity to observe the snowpack using a snow profile. These localized but detailed observations can offer valuable insights. However, it's important to understand their limitations. Matching observational techniques to the current avalanche conditions provides more relevant information. In this case, when dealing with wind affected snow, visual observations of local loading patterns, such as drifts and textured

surfaces, and tactile clues, like very firm slabs, could have more effectively identified this particular slope as potentially hazardous.

Limited Access to Avalanche Forecast and Weather Data:
The group stayed at a remote backcountry hut with no internet or cellular coverage. This prevented them from obtaining an updated avalanche forecast and accurate weather data. When recreating without real-time data and forecasts, it is important to recognize the lack of information, increased uncertainty, and the impact these have on our ability to accurately assess conditions. One way to manage this increase in uncertainty is to choose lower-angle, less consequential, and/or simpler terrain.

Emergency Response:
In the face of a tragic accident, the group was trained and prepared with the correct equipment and skills. This allowed them to attempt CPR quickly and recognize the complications associated with traveling out of the backcountry with an unstable injury. They also carried a satellite communication device, enabling them to contact emergency services and initiate search and rescue operations. These facts may not have changed the outcome of this incident. However, being prepared for emergencies can have real impacts. These skills and tools should be considered by anyone traveling in remote backcountry settings.