

20260226 Big Chief Bowl Incident

Report by Josh Hirshberg

Incident Summary:

On February 26th, a solo skier was caught in an avalanche in the Big Chief Bowl area, inbounds at Stevens Pass Mountain Resort. Shortly after 12:10 pm, the skier triggered the slide while traversing near the top of the bowl. He was caught, pushed into a cavity near a large boulder, and fully buried with his head about 1.5-2 feet below the snow surface. In the late afternoon, the skier's family notified Stevens Pass Ski Patrol that he was missing and shared the skier's phone location. Ski Patrol mobilized to Big Chief Bowl and quickly located the buried skier using a Recco receiver, then an avalanche probe. They extricated him after he had been buried for at least 4.5 hours. The skier was breathing and showing signs of cold exposure. Patrol transported him down the mountain and to an ambulance. He was treated for hypothermia, a leg fracture, and non-life-threatening internal injuries.

Accident Details:

Occurrence Time and Date: Approximately 12:15 pm on February 26th, 2026

Time First Reported to SAR: 3:45 pm, The skier's wife contacted patrol dispatch.

Recovery/Rescue Time: 5:11 pm, Rescuers confirmed a probe strike

Lat/Lon: 47.73992, -121.07743 (crown location)

Location: Big Chief Bowl, Stevens Pass Ski Resort, Big Chief Mountain, Chelan Co., Okanogan Wenatchee NF, WA

Group Information:

Number in Party: 1

Number Caught: 1

Number Partially Buried, Critical or Not-critical: 0

Number Completely Buried: 1

Duration of Burial: At least 4 hours and 30 minutes.

Number Injured: 1

Number Killed: 0

Avalanche Safety Gear Carried: None

Avalanche Training and Experience at Activity: Avalanche awareness. Basic avalanche companion rescue training as part of a guided party. Expert downhill skier

Signs of Instability Noted by Group: Increased sluffing on leeward, sun-exposed slopes

Extent of Injuries: Fractured tibia plateau, lung contusion, pneumonia, hypothermia

Site Information:

Start Zone Aspect: NW, 325 degrees

Start Zone Angle: 34 degrees

Start Zone Elevation: 5340ft (at crown)

Avalanche Information:

Avalanche Type: Hard Slab (HS)

Trigger: Artificial Trigger: Skier, Unintentional (ASu)

Size: R1, D1.5

Bed Surface: Old Snow (O)

Dimensions:

Height of Crown Face: Estimate average 15 inches (40cm), maximum 30 inches (75cm).

Width of Fracture: Estimate average 30 feet (9 meters), maximum 50 feet (15 meters).

Vertical Fall: Estimate 75 feet (22.9 meters), maximum 100 feet (30.5 meters)

Slab Characteristics: Pencil+ to 1 Finger- rounded grains.

A profile near the crown revealed 10.6 inches (27cm) of P+ to 1F and 4 inches (10cm) of 1F- over the weak layer. The avalanche also entrained additional soft snow.

Weak Layer Characteristics: 4 Finger+, 0.5mm, rounding facets, buried on February 18th, 13.4 inches (37cm) below the surface at profile.

Bed Surface Characteristics: Pencil+, melt freeze crust, buried on February 8th, 19.3 inches (49cm) below the surface at profile.

Path:

Burial involved a terrain trap: Yes, a subtle gully and a large cavity/hole upslope of a boulder.

Number of people that crossed start zone before avalanche: Unknown

Avalanche occurred during: Traversing

Location of group in relation to start zone during avalanche: Top of start zone, below the crown.

Backcountry Avalanche Forecast:

NWAC Forecast Zone: Stevens Pass Zone.

NWAC provides daily backcountry avalanche forecasts during the winter season. The following text accompanies each forecast.

"This information is provided by the U.S.D.A. Forest Service and describes general backcountry avalanche hazard and conditions.

It does not apply to ski areas and highways where avalanche mitigation is conducted."

Since this incident occurred within an open ski area boundary, the published avalanche forecast is not directly applicable. The Stevens Pass avalanche forecast for February 26, 2026, is provided for additional context.

<https://nwac.us/avalanche-forecast/#/forecast/2/181427>

Avalanche Summary:

When NWAC forecasters visited the accident site on February 27th, the avalanche was somewhat obscured due to ongoing blowing snow that covered portions of the debris and crown. The avalanche was approximately 30 feet wide, 15 inches deep, and ran 75 vertical feet. It was rated as a Destructive Size 1.5 or D1.5. Avalanches of this size are typically considered small and not large enough to bury or injure a person without the addition of a terrain trap such as a boulder or hole.

A snow profile near the crown found that the avalanche likely failed on a thick, weak layer of rounding facets (0.5mm) that were buried on February 18th, about 13 to 14 inches below the surface. The avalanche entrained the snow down to the February 8th crust, about 19 inches below the surface.

Snowpack Summary:

Inbounds, open terrain snowpacks can contain different layer structures than adjacent backcountry areas due to ski area mitigation efforts and skier traffic. However, weather processes are the same.

A prolonged dry period in January, followed by warm precipitation through February 8th, led to the formation of a series of crusts (2/7 and 2/8) in the upper snowpack. Light snowfall, high pressure, and cold temperatures formed weak layers adjacent to and above the crusts (2/13 surface hoar and 2/18 facets). On Feb 22-23rd, the Schmidt Haus weather station received over 8 inches of snow with 0.65 inches of snow water equivalent. This was followed by strong winds on the 25-27th. Intense blowing snow drifted thicker slabs and stressed the weak snowpack across a range of leeward aspects at all elevations. While the dominant wind direction was westerly, winds were so strong that observers noted drifting from almost all directions, as influenced by localized terrain features.

In the surrounding backcountry zone, a cycle of natural and triggered avalanches was reported on leeward slopes on the 26th through the 28th. It's presumed, and in some cases confirmed, that many of the avalanches failed on the weak layers above the 2/8 crust, which was an average of 15-25 inches below the surface.

Terrain:

Big Chief Bowl is inbounds terrain, consisting of an undulating talus field. The bowl and adjacent runs were open on the 26th. Due to the shallow snowpack, it featured many exposed boulders, some with adjacent holes and cavities. The crown was located below a large cliff band that forms the upper reaches of the bowl's skiable terrain. The avalanche ran through a subtle gulley that ends in a flat bench. The gulley was likely cross-loaded by blowing snow from the northeast. Additionally, the upper slopes of the bowl may have featured slabs formed by snow sifting off the cliffs above.

Accident Summary:

Shortly after 12:10 pm, the skier traversed across the top of the bowl and noticed firmer snow under his skis. He saw the slope break around and above him just before he was carried down slope. The avalanche swept the skier into a hole uphill of a rock. This likely contributed to a deeper burial than would have typically occurred for an avalanche of this size. As the debris settled around him, he used one arm to clear a sizeable air pocket in front of his face. He was positioned semi-standing, bent at the waist in an "L" shape, with his head downhill, face down, and one ski pressed against a rock.

Rescue Summary:

Prior to the avalanche, the skier had been in frequent text communication with his wife. After not hearing back from him and noticing that the skier's phone location hadn't moved, the skier's wife contacted Ski Patrol dispatch. She shared his location in Big Chief Bowl.

Ski Patrol mobilized to the scene, located the avalanche, and used a Recco receiver to search the area. Searchers located a signal in the debris and then used an avalanche probe to pinpoint the skier below the surface. It was not determined whether the skier's clothing featured Recco reflectors. However, he was carrying electronics, including a smart watch and a phone, which have, on occasion, been detected by Recco receivers. This is the first documented live recovery of a person with a Recco receiver in North America.

When Ski Patrol extracted the skier from the snow, he was breathing and verbally responsive. Rescuers stated that some of the snow surrounding the skier, especially near the rock, was easy to shovel through.

The skier had been buried for at least 4.5 hours. Live avalanche recoveries of this length are rare; however, the large air pocket created by the skier, the cavity near the boulder, and the soft snows surrounding the skier may have contributed to the fact that he did not asphyxiate.