

PREPARING FOR THE PRO/REC SPLIT: A PERMITTING VIEWPOINT

BY KELLI ROHRIG

The idea of creating a professional/recreational avalanche education split in the US was first brought to the table over three years ago when the AAA introduced the concept at the 2014 Banff ISSW. Further information and updates were made available by Sean Zimmerman-Wall in volume 34.1 and 34.3 of *The Avalanche Review* and by AAA ED Jaime Musnicki at many of the local workshops since 2014. It wasn't until this fall at the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) refresher at the Breckenridge ISSW that it dawned on me that the split was actually going to happen. The tentative rollout for the split is scheduled for November 2017.

Everyone can see the benefit of an educated backcountry user. Reported avalanche accidents are staying relatively constant even though our backcountry community is growing exponentially each year. This is a direct reflection on the increasing number of people who are seeking avalanche education. All of our local guide services and schools that offer avalanche education have been sold out, with long waitlists, all season. So far this season, we've added three additional level 1 classes to accommodate the need for education in our area.

As of next November, a fully educated recreational backcountry user will now have the opportunity to participate in four classes; Avalanche Awareness, Level 1, Avalanche/Companion Rescue, and Level 2. Although I'm stoked for the opportunity to offer a dedicated one-day rescue curriculum, my thoughts immediately turned to user days and the need for additional days next season to encompass the increase in classes offered. We are already stretched on our service days with five fully booked classes. Looking into the future, there will be more clients wanting to complete the entire recreational avalanche education track and that will tax service days further.

We were starting to sweat the need for more user days created by the new track and the potential effects on our local guide businesses. Thankfully, during our morning brain clearing ski tours, we came up with some adaptive business strategies. I thought maybe we could approach our much-appreciated special use permit administrator at the Forest Service and try to get more service days for all the educators in the area. After a formal meeting with our special use

permit guru and representatives from local businesses and organizations, I started to better understand the permitting process. I was delighted to hear that just like our avalanche community, the Forest Service is on the verge of a cultural transformation too.

SPECIAL USES MODERNIZATION

The Forest Service is an agency that has been around since the days of President Teddy Roosevelt. After 112 years, the Forest Service is officially revamping their permit process. In what was billed as the first of many planned working groups, some of the agency's top rec officials met with outdoor industry leaders last September in Denver. In a September 28th *Denver Post* article by Jason Blevins, (www.denverpost.com/2016/09/28/forest-service-cultural-shift-access-public-lands/) it was reported that the group discussed the "cultural shift" the Forest Service proposes that will "encourage more Americans to more safely explore more public lands." The article went on to say that "most importantly District Rangers and Permit Managers will be given more leeway to waive more intensive reviews and fast-track approvals for commercial or non-profit activities that don't have any greater impact than normal public use." Basically, the Forest Service recognizes the need to adjust to things like the new education track coming down the pipeline next season.

What exactly does it mean for me as an educator who works closely with local outfitters and runs a non-profit that provides avalanche education to youth? My permit administrator explained that this means a few things. Every district and forest across the nation has a different recreation demographic. Additionally, each district has a myriad of stakeholders and community issues that need to be balanced with the conservation of wildlife and natural resources. Similar to backcountry riders, each District Ranger has a different risk tolerance that he or she is willing to accept when it comes to decision-making. Each special use permit administrator has to be "fair and equitable" to current permit holders and also respond to the barrage of permit applications that range from events to research to military permits. The calm demeanor my permit administrator exuded was in great contrast to the mayhem happening around his office.

After our hour of permit banter on what we as educators can do to make permitting easier and our administrator's life easier, I felt like we had made some headway going into next season. The end result is we need to start the process now and start thinking outside the box.

SO...WHERE ELSE CAN WE RUN AVALANCHE CLASSES?

I asked my Forest Service mentor if I need Forest Service System land for all my classes. The new one-day Avalanche Rescue/Companion Rescue class will require an additional day of service days if offered on FS lands. We are also developing opportunities with a new focus on youth avalanche education in our area that may also

require more service days. Can we develop new partnerships and utilize sites like high school football fields, college campuses, town parks or similar areas? And do those sites require separate permits and permissions?

HOW DOES THE FOREST SERVICE STAY "FAIR AND EQUITABLE" TO PERMIT REQUESTS?

As a land management agency, the Forest Service needs to look out for public interest while balancing what's best for nature. We can't be granted additional service days without a fair and equitable approach with which to derive them. Historically, additional permit days could be granted after the Forest Service completed a capacity analysis. If additional capacity existed, the Forest Service would then go through a prospectus, solicit applications from potential operations and finally, award service days. Fortunately, the Forest Service has been modernizing and has opened new pathways to fast track service day approvals, especially days for educational programs. Some districts have utilized an authority which allows responsible officials to authorize educational and informational programs and activities. I know that some districts have set up "pool" days specifically designated for avalanche education days that outfitter/guides can apply for. These pool days are available through a one-year temporary permit.

START DISCUSSING OPPORTUNITIES WITH YOUR PERMIT ADMINISTRATOR NOW!

We are all well aware that trailheads, especially in areas where terrain is easily reached, are verging on overload. When we add multiple avalanche classes to these already overwhelmed trailheads, we may be overburdening the infrastructure. The advice given to me was to apply for permit days mid week. Apply for use in areas not on the top 10 visitors list. Most importantly, get your applications in as soon as possible giving your organization plenty of time to come up with creative use areas that your permit administrator can shepherd towards approval. Discussing a proposal before the application deadline may remove potential challenges. Work together with every avalanche education entity in your area to create a unified voice; we all have similar opportunities to develop a better educated backcountry community so that everyone can safely explore more public lands. ▲

Kelli Rohrig teaches avalanche classes in mountain ranges near and far. A Colorado native who has lived in the Alps, Montana and around Colorado, she now bases out of Vail. She is currently launching the Glide Project to bring avalanche education into Colorado classrooms.



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