GNFAC Avalanche Forecast for Fri Apr 15, 2022

Good Morning. This is Ian Hoyer with a spring weather and snowpack update on Friday, April 15th. The Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center has stopped issuing daily avalanche forecasts for the season. We will issue weather and snowpack updates on Monday and Friday mornings through April.

Mountain Weather

Since Monday, the mountains have received 1-1.5 ft of new snow. Winds have been strong and shifting, including some unusual east winds. Skies stayed mostly cloudy and high temperatures stayed below freezing. This weekend, skies will remain mostly cloudy, high temperatures will be a few degrees warmer (but still unseasonably cool), and snow showers are possible (particularly on Saturday night). Total accumulations will likely be only 2-4” by Monday.

Snowpack and Avalanche Discussion

All Regions

A cold spring storm this past week brought a return to wintery riding conditions and the attendant avalanche concerns. This weekend won’t be as bitterly cold, but with cloudy skies and temperatures generally remaining below freezing, dry snow avalanches will remain the primary concern.

The issue you’re most likely to encounter are avalanches breaking in the new and wind drifted snow. As the storm rolled in on Monday, a skier in the Bridger Range triggered a small slab in the new snow on a small slope (**photo**). With substantial storm totals since then, larger and more dangerous slides are now possible. Watch for stiff, punchy feeling slabs and cracks shooting out in front of you as signs that you’ve found a slope where you could trigger a slab avalanche. Winds have blown from almost every direction over the past few days, so keep an eye out for wind loading in unusual areas. If you don’t see obvious signs of instability, dig down to check the interface between the new and old snow (and on cold, shady slopes dig a bit deeper to look for persistent weak layers that may still lurk another 1-3 ft deeper).

A quick break in the clouds or temperatures rising a bit higher than expected would add wet loose sloughs to our list of concerns. The mid-April sun is intense, it’ll only take a few minutes of direct sunshine to dampen and destabilize the snow surface. If the new snow is getting warm and feeling sticky, be on alert because you could trigger a loose wet slide.

Continue to follow safe travel protocols by skiing and riding with a partner, carrying a beacon, shovel and probe and exposing only one person at a time to avalanche terrain.

A Note on Bridger Bowl: Without the daily avalanche mitigation efforts of the ski patrol, backcountry conditions now exist within the boundaries of Bridger Bowl (**video**). Commonly traveled routes such the North Bowl Road and any slope steeper than 30 degrees are avalanche terrain (i.e. most of the Ridge and Schlasman’s terrain). Other groups above and below you may complicate principles of safe travel.

We will issue spring snowpack and weather updates each Monday and Friday through April, or as needed, and we will share relevant avalanche and snowpack information on our website and social media. If you get out, please send us your observations no matter how brief. You can submit them via our **website**, email (**mtavalanche@gmail.com**), phone (406-587-6984), or Instagram (#gnfacobs).

Announcements, Avalanche Education and Events

Bridger Bowl is closed, and backcountry conditions exist. There is no avalanche mitigation or ski patrol rescue. In case of emergency, call 911. Please stay clear of work areas, snowmobiles, chair lifts and other equipment.

GENERAL SPRING SNOWPACK AND TRAVEL ADVICE

Spring weather can be highly variable and create a mix of avalanche problems. Snow conditions and stability can change drastically from day to day or hour to hour. Anticipate rapid change and plan accordingly. Abundant snowfall over the winter with more spring snow to come makes avalanches possible into summer.

NEW SNOW AND WIND LOADED SLOPES

Spring storms are notorious for depositing heavy amounts of snow in the mountains. Even with a deep and generally stable snowpack throughout the advisory area, heavy and rapid loads of new snow will decrease stability. The main problems to look out for are avalanches breaking within the new snow, wind slabs, and loose snow avalanches. The likelihood of triggering an avalanche spikes during and immediately after snowstorms. New snow instabilities tend to stabilize quickly, but it's a good idea to give fresh snow a day to adjust before hitting big terrain. New snow instabilities can be challenging to assess, and spring storms bond to old snow differently across aspects and elevations. Conservative terrain selection is essential during and immediately following storms. Avoid wind-loaded slopes and slopes steeper than 35 degrees for 24-48 hours after new snow and wind.

New snow can quickly change from dry to wet on a spring day, and stability can decrease rapidly with above freezing temperatures or brief sunshine. New snow may bond well early in the morning and then easily slide later. Wet loose slides are likely during the first above freezing temperatures or sunshine immediately after a storm. Anticipate changes in snow stability as you change aspect or elevation and over the course of the day. An early start is always an advantage. Be ready to change plans or move to safer terrain at the first signs of decreasing stability.

WET SNOW AVALANCHES

Spring and wet snow avalanches go hand-in-hand. Above freezing temperatures, rain, and/or intense sunshine cause the snow to become wet and weak and make wet avalanches easy to trigger or release naturally. Conditions tend to become most unstable when temperatures stay above freezing for multiple days and nights in a row. Avoid steep terrain, and be aware of the potential for natural wet avalanches in steep terrain above you, if you see:

- Heavy rain,
- Above freezing temperatures for more than 24 hours,
- Natural wet avalanches,
- Rollerballs or pinwheels indicating a moist or wet snow surface,
- Or if you sink to your boot top in wet snow.

In general, if the snow surface freezes solid overnight, the snowpack will be stable in the morning and stability will decrease through the day as snow warms up. The snow surface hardness, rate of warming, duration of sunshine, aspect and elevation determine how fast stability will decrease through the day. Be aware that sunny aspects may have a wet snow avalanche danger while shadier slopes still have a dry snow avalanche danger.

Getting off of steep slopes should be considered when, or before, the above signs of instability are present. Wet snow avalanches, whether loose snow or slabs, can be powerful, destructive and very dangerous. Conservative terrain choices, starting early in the day, and careful observations can keep you safe. See Alex's recent video, and this article for more spring travel advice.

CORNICES

Cornices along ridgelines are massive and can break under the weight of a person (photo). Prolonged above freezing temperatures and rain make them weaker and possible to break naturally. They can break off suddenly and farther back than one might expect. Cornice falls can also entrain large amounts of loose snow or trigger slab avalanches. Stay far back from the edge of ridgelines and minimize exposure to slopes directly below cornices. Regardless of whether a cornice triggers a slide or not, a falling cornice is dangerous to anyone in its path.

DISCLAIMER

It does not matter if new snow falls or not, avalanches will continue to occur until the existing snowpack is mostly gone. Always assess the slope you plan to ride with diligence and safety in mind. Do not let your guard down. Travel with a partner, carry rescue gear and only expose one person at a time in avalanche terrain.

Have a safe and enjoyable spring and summer!

Doug, Alex, Ian and Dave

For more spring travel advice see this **article** from our GNFAC forecaster blog.