



NWAC

2015 | 2016

ANNUAL REPORT

Message from the Directors

We are happy to report that the Northwest Avalanche Center had a great year and has successfully rebounded from the non-winter of 2014-15, thanks in large part to the support of our partners and the Northwest backcountry community.

The winter of 2015-16 started with a bang in the Northwest, with one of the snowiest Decembers on record, providing many great powder days for skiers and riders of all types. Unfortunately, the month ended with one of the two avalanche fatalities that occurred in our forecast region this season. High-profile philanthropist and outdoorsman, Doug Walker, was killed in a small slide while snowshoeing on Granite Mountain. Unfortunately, we suffered one other avalanche fatality, when Bellingham skier Mark Pantheon was caught in a natural slide on Mt Herman in the backcountry near Mount Baker at the end of January. Despite the growing number of people recreating in the mountains in the winter, two avalanche fatalities, while tragic nonetheless, is slightly below the historic average for the Northwest and speaks to the success of the NWAC programs as we strive for zero fatalities.

Following are some of the highlights from this winter that we were able to accomplish with the community's support:

- We made several improvements to the website, including a new weather station map.
- We added the mountain weather forecast to our mobile app.
- We taught 167 avalanche awareness classes and grew this program with both youth and snowmobile audiences.
- We took over the Northwest Snow and Avalanche Workshop and grew it in attendance from roughly 400 to 650 participants.
- We hosted several successful fundraisers, including a new and improved SnowBash at the evo Seattle store, growing this event from roughly 350 to over 600 attendees, and another successful Vertfest, which bounced back after being cancelled last year, with a near-record turn-out despite rainy weather.
- We successfully worked with the Washington State legislature to increase funding for the forecasting operation, which put us on track to hire additional forecasting help for next season.

In addition to all of these accomplishments, the winter of 2015-16 has proven to be a transitional one for NWAC, with several staffing changes in the works as we prepare for next season. The non-profit arm of NWAC will be under new leadership as Benj Wadsworth is moving on after eight years running the non-profit. In addition, the Program Coordinator, Nick Rustigian, is heading to Bozeman, MT to bring his skills to another non-profit.

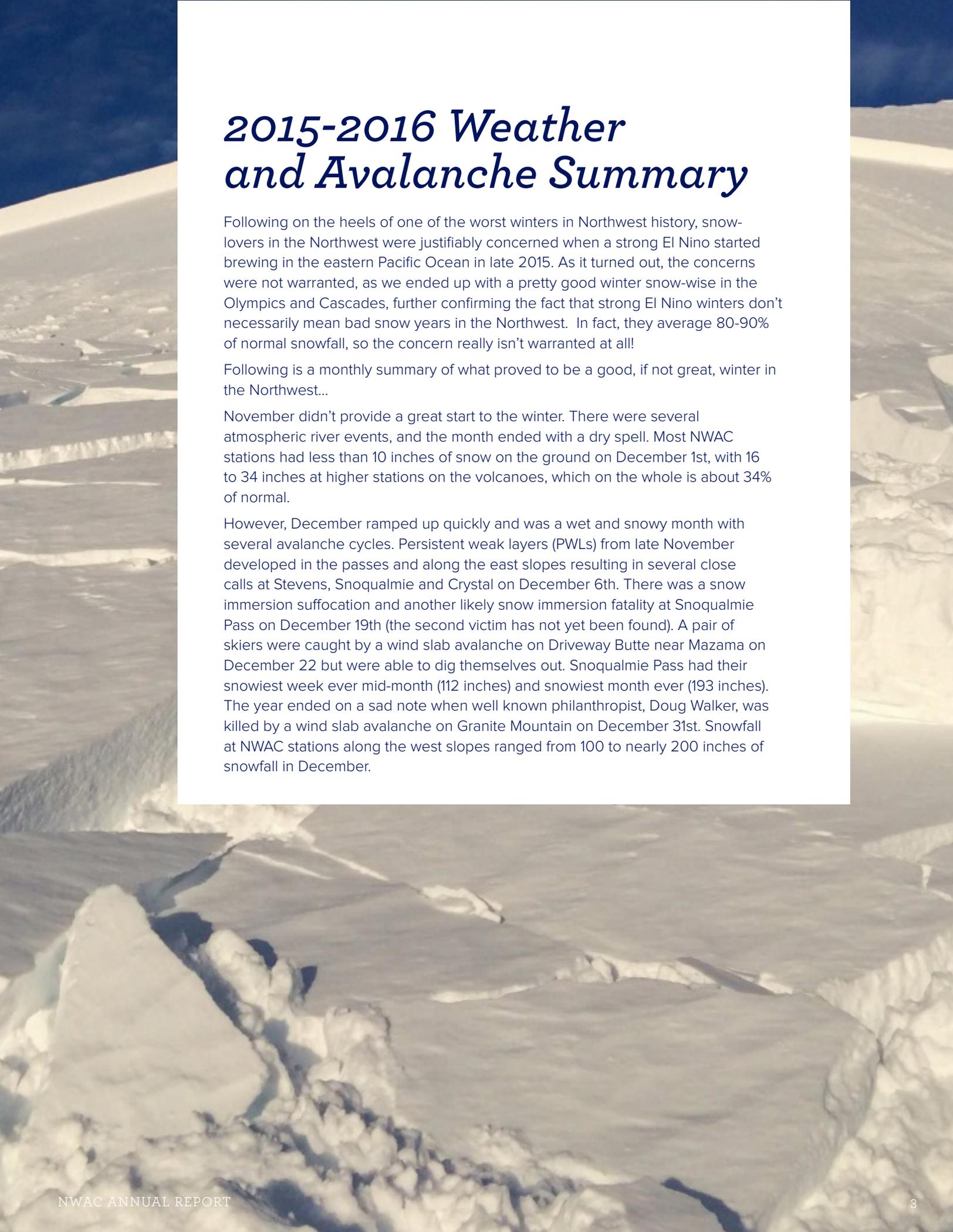
While this transition will be challenging, change is exciting, and the future is bright as NWAC heads into its next phase of growth. The process to hire a new Executive Director is underway, and the new staff will be ready to roll in September as we launch into another exciting season with a strong non-profit board and a wide range of support from agency partners, the outdoor industry and the backcountry community as a whole. None of our work would be possible without that support, and we are truly grateful for it.

Thank you!

Kenny Kramer, USFS NWAC Director

Benj Wadsworth, Non-profit Executive Director





2015-2016 Weather and Avalanche Summary

Following on the heels of one of the worst winters in Northwest history, snow-lovers in the Northwest were justifiably concerned when a strong El Nino started brewing in the eastern Pacific Ocean in late 2015. As it turned out, the concerns were not warranted, as we ended up with a pretty good winter snow-wise in the Olympics and Cascades, further confirming the fact that strong El Nino winters don't necessarily mean bad snow years in the Northwest. In fact, they average 80-90% of normal snowfall, so the concern really isn't warranted at all!

Following is a monthly summary of what proved to be a good, if not great, winter in the Northwest...

November didn't provide a great start to the winter. There were several atmospheric river events, and the month ended with a dry spell. Most NWAC stations had less than 10 inches of snow on the ground on December 1st, with 16 to 34 inches at higher stations on the volcanoes, which on the whole is about 34% of normal.

However, December ramped up quickly and was a wet and snowy month with several avalanche cycles. Persistent weak layers (PWLs) from late November developed in the passes and along the east slopes resulting in several close calls at Stevens, Snoqualmie and Crystal on December 6th. There was a snow immersion suffocation and another likely snow immersion fatality at Snoqualmie Pass on December 19th (the second victim has not yet been found). A pair of skiers were caught by a wind slab avalanche on Driveway Butte near Mazama on December 22 but were able to dig themselves out. Snoqualmie Pass had their snowiest week ever mid-month (112 inches) and snowiest month ever (193 inches). The year ended on a sad note when well known philanthropist, Doug Walker, was killed by a wind slab avalanche on Granite Mountain on December 31st. Snowfall at NWAC stations along the west slopes ranged from 100 to nearly 200 inches of snowfall in December.

January was at times fair, wet or snowy. PWLs got buried on both sides of the crest following fair weather periods on January 3rd and January 11th. A solo ski tourer was injured in an avalanche triggered on the January 11th PWL near Crystal Mountain on January 15th. The second avalanche fatality of the winter came when a glide avalanche hit a pair of skiers on Mt Herman near Mount Baker on January 24th. A snowmobiler had a close call at Lake Clara near Mission Ridge on January 25th due to the January 3rd PWL.

Fair weather dominated in early February, but nonetheless, two skiers were caught and injured in a wind slab avalanche near Crystal Mountain on February 6th. More snow followed later in the month, and PWLs continued to be a problem for the east slopes due to layers buried there on February 11th and 27th.

March was fairly snowy with another 60-100 inches of snowfall at NWAC stations along the west slopes. PWLs from February remained problematic along the east slopes until they strengthened late in the month.

April brought two major warm, dry periods with freezing levels rising to over 12,000 feet. This caused some avalanches and subsequently consolidated the snow and quickly erased much of our slightly above average snowpack.

In summary, El Nino brought plenty of water to the Cascades this winter. Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Snotel stations in the Washington Cascades had precipitation in the 120-150% of normal range for the November 1st to March 15th period. NWAC stations in the Cascades had an average of about 113% of normal snow on the ground on March 15th (Figure 1). This difference is likely due to warmer than normal conditions (Figure 2) this winter that resulted in more rain or melting than usual.

We issued fewer avalanche warnings than usual this season – just three in January and one on March 1st. Our long term average is 20-30 warnings per season. The periodic warm, wet weather during the winter months, followed by the warm, dry spring likely helped limit instability this winter.

Photo: Scott Schell

Figure 1. March 15, 2016 Snowdepths and Normals (inches)

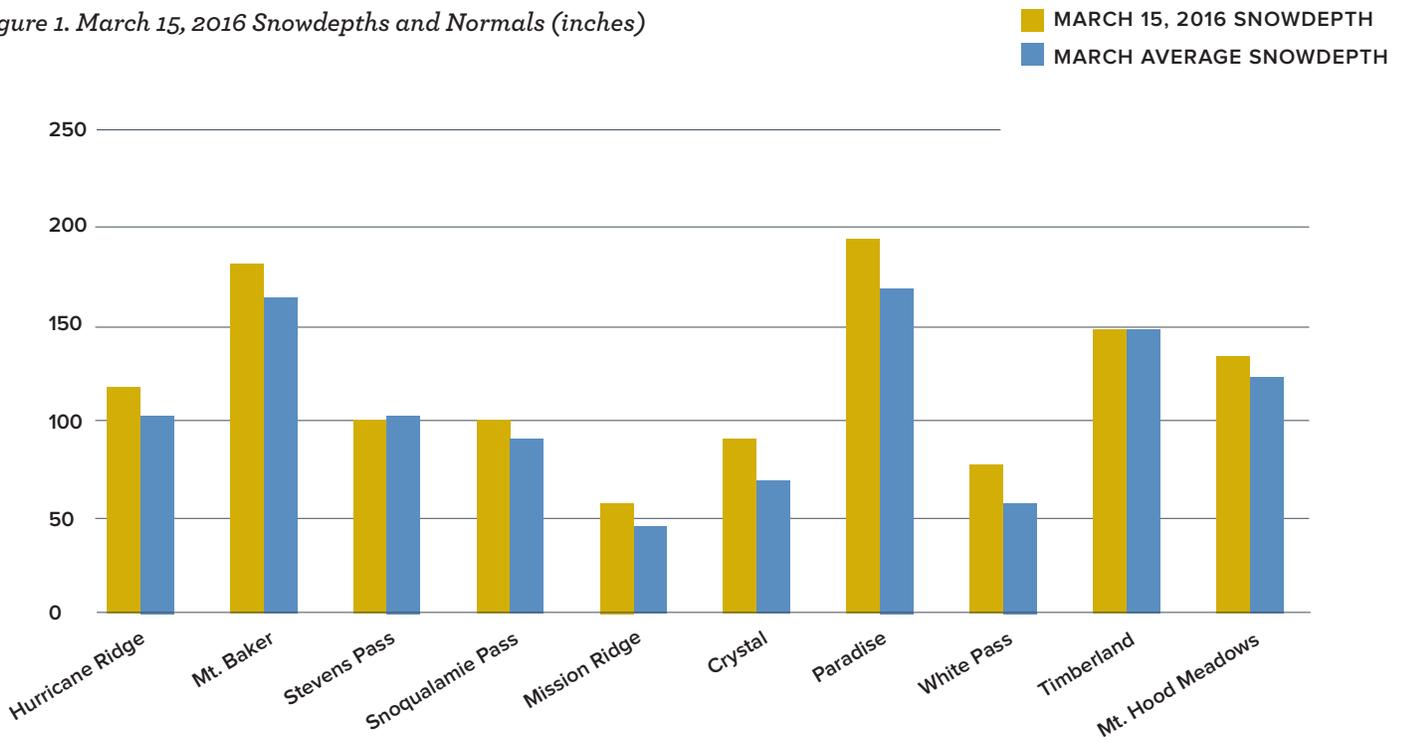
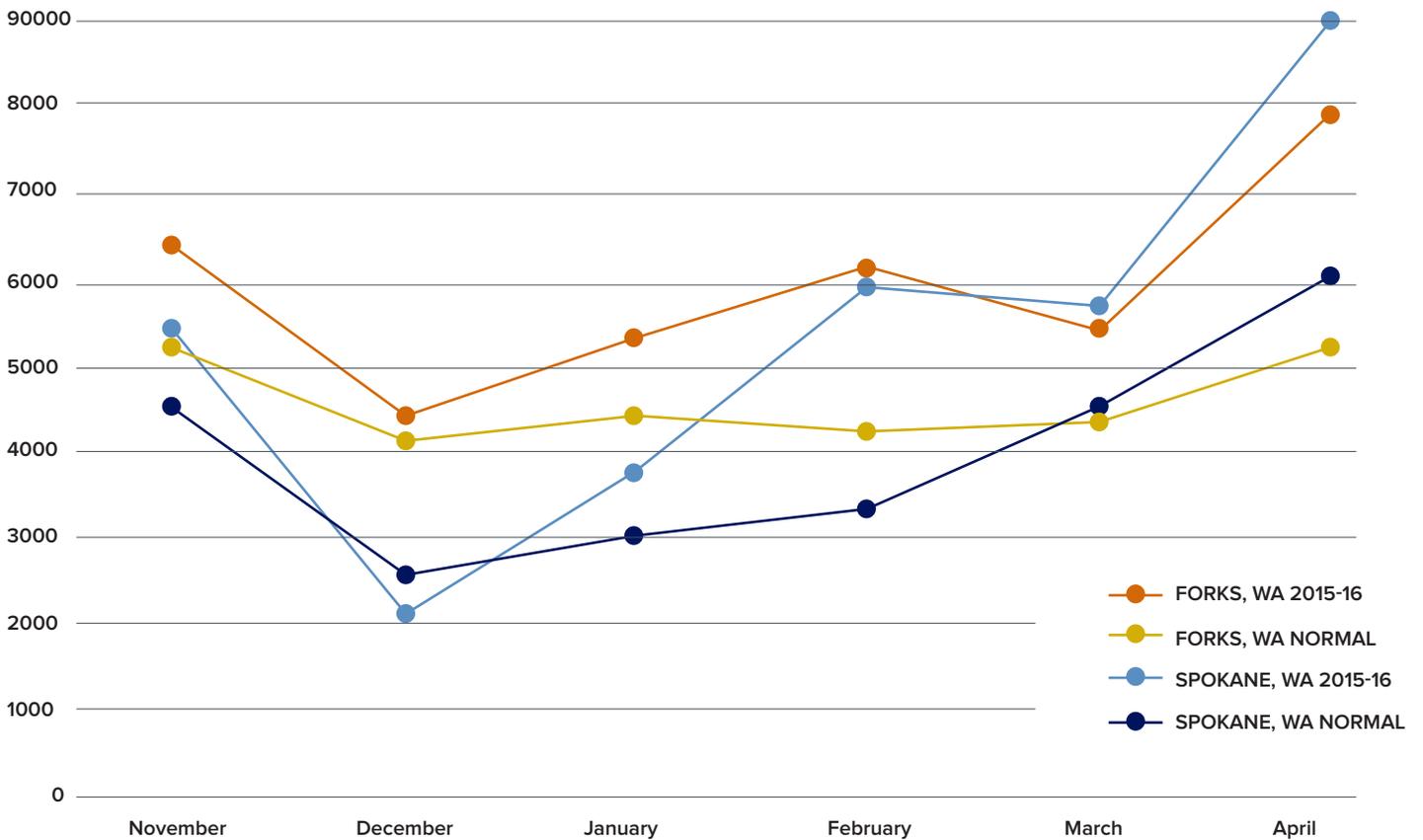


Figure 2. 2015-2016 Average Freezing Levels and Normals (feet)



Professional Observer Program

Our seven Professional Observers spent over 250 collective days gathering vital snowpack information for our forecast team. Pro Observers augment existing info from our professional partner organizations with backcountry specific data. The program operates from December into May.

In addition to detailed forms submitted to the forecasters, the observers directly interface with the community through social media. Observers submitted videos to the NWAC YouTube channel along with images and videos on Instagram. We focused on Instagram this season with great success. Pro Observers posted conditions on IG for nearly all of their outings, and the images appeared on the NWAC regional avalanche forecast pages. We also continued to work with satellite-pushed Twitter posts from the field that helped augment traditional forecasting communication.

Overall, this program continues to be a huge success, and we received many positive comments from the mountain community.



Technology

We made several improvements to both the mobile app and the website this season. We added two exciting features to the app: observation submission capability and the mountain weather display. The mountain weather is now nicely displayed in an easy-to-read mobile format alongside the avalanche forecasts, and our new public observation tool now accepts your images, so you can share them with the NWAC forecasters and the community. The mobile app is available on both Android and iOS platforms.

In addition to the routine maintenance, we added some great new features to the website this winter. Our new homepage map of the avalanche zones, previously maintained by a third party, is now operated by NWAC, allowing us to better respond to outages and technical glitches. The new map also shows all of the weather stations with roll-over information providing data for each station.

Lastly, we began a multi-season project to rebuild our mountain weather forecast on both the website and the mobile app. The time has come to bring the NWAC weather forecast up to speed with our avalanche products. Over the next two years, we plan to rebuild how we create the forecast, how it's entered into the website (saving forecaster time), and ultimately, how the user obtains the information to plan a day in the mountains.



Mountain Weather Stations

With essential field assistance from our program partners, NWAC maintains over 40 unique mountain weather stations stretching from Mt Baker to Mt Hood in the Cascades and at Hurricane Ridge in the Olympic Mountains. NWAC downloads hourly weather station data and stores it locally in our forecast office and on an Amazon webserver. The data is then displayed through various formats on our website and on many of our partner's websites. The mountain weather station network is an important and popular part of the NWAC program.

The 2015-16 season was a challenging year for providing weather station maintenance at NWAC. We transitioned several stations from phone line to internet, a staff member injury in mid-January limited forecaster field trips, and an internet network change at our forecast office required a large amount of unanticipated forecaster time and effort. We put a tremendous amount of daily effort into monitoring and responding to outages in our weather station network, but we can't always keep up with the problems. During the forecast season we are forced to prioritize station outages and maintenance with other demands of the program. We are hoping to hire additional staff over the next few seasons as well as develop a more sustainable management plan for our weather station network.

Photo: Steve Hyde



Education

It was a great year for snow, and a great year for avalanche education! We had the biggest year to date for our class offerings. We're honored to have the opportunity to work with so many wonderful groups and organizations; from local freeride teams to high school physics classes; from the US Navy to local Search and Rescue; from snowmobile clubs to snowshoe groups—all connecting around a central tenet: enjoying the wintertime backcountry, and doing so safely.

We began the year with the ambitious goal of providing 175 awareness classes throughout our forecast area and we are excited to say we came very close to hitting our goal. We successfully scheduled over 175 classes targeting all users who frequent the wintertime backcountry, and our education efforts are continuing to expand into new locations and user groups. In the end, we conducted 167 public classes and lectures reaching over 5700 people. These included 89 adult classes, 68 youth classes, 8 snowmobile classes, and two youth specific snowmobile classes!

This was also our fourth year running our very successful Going Deep program, a continuing education for recreationists in the northwest backcountry community. Going Deep targets experienced backcountry skiers and riders addressing some of the limitations of conventional avalanche education. This season, all five classes were hosted at the Seattle REI. We're fortunate to have great sponsorship to help keep participation costs low. This season's sponsors were MSR, Eddie Bauer, New Belgium Brewing, and REI in Seattle. Plans are afoot to run a similar program next year and take the show on the road to other PNW communities.

Lastley, this was our second year conducting the Mt. Baker Snowschool. NWAC partnered with the Mt. Baker Ski Area, North Cascades Institute (NCI), USFS, and Western Washington University to bring the Mt. Baker SnowSchool to the middle and high school students of Whatcom County. Meeting Washington State Core Content requirements for middle school science, students use the scientific method as they act as avalanche forecasters gathering field data and writing an avalanche forecast in the field at Mt Baker Ski Area. SnowSchool exposed over 300 students to our snowpack, blending a message of avalanche safety, science education, and watershed conservation.



Education by-the-numbers

167

Total Classes Conducted

89 Adult Classes



👤 = 5 classes

68 Youth Classes



👤 = 5 classes

6 Adult Snowmobile Classes



2 Youth Snowmobile Classes



Going Deep Workshops

#1

*Everything You Ever Wanted
to Know About Avy Forecasting (But
Were Afraid to Ask):*

An Evening with the Staff of the Northwest
Avalanche Center

#2

Recreate Like a Pro —

Using a Systems Analysis Approach to Make
Better Backcountry Decisions, Presented
by Lynne Wolfe of the American Avalanche
Association

#3

*Does Green Mean Go
and Red Mean Stop?*

How to Apply the Avalanche Danger Scale to
Slope Specific Decision Making, Presented
by Simon Trautman of the National Avalanche
Center

#4

*The Art of
Terrain Management,*

Presented by NWAC

#5

*Making the Transition
from Winter to Spring:*

How to Plan Big Lines and Multiday Tours
Without a Daily NWAC Avalanche Forecast,
Presented by NWAC

Public Outreach

With the rapidly growing number of people playing in the backcountry in the winter, the need to raise awareness about NWAC has never been greater. With this in mind, we have focused a lot of energy on spreading the word about NWAC in recent years, and we are happy to report that our efforts are paying off. After a couple of lackluster winters, traffic to our website is on the rise again with almost 1.7 million sessions from over 450,000 unique users on the site—the highest numbers we have ever reported by a significant margin. Social media has become an increasingly important and effective tool for disseminating crucial information. The reality is that users are checking their social media feeds more often than the forecast. Our Pro Observers update followers live from the field and the forecasters post when particularly dangerous conditions arise. We now have close to 10,000 fans on Facebook, a 40% increase over last year, and our followers on Instagram increased by more than 65% in the past year to over 5600. If you aren't already, we encourage you to follow us for the latest news from NWAC including hazard updates, education updates, and event announcements.



1.7 million
Web Sessions

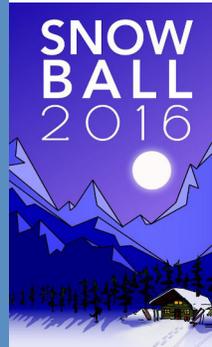
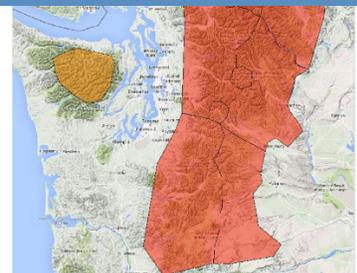
450,000
Unique Users



40%
Increase in followers



65%
Increase in followers



NORTHWEST **NSAW** SNOW & AVALANCHE WORKSHOP

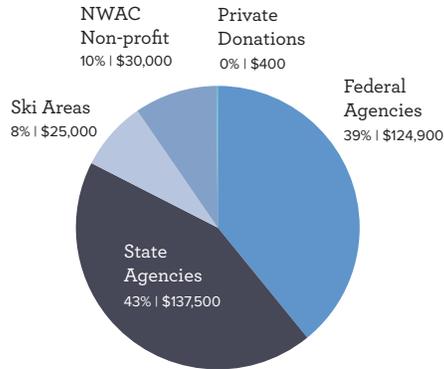
Last November, NWAC took the reins of the Northwest's largest backcountry educational event, the Northwest Snow and Avalanche Workshop (NSAW). We packed UW's HUB with over 650 recreationists and snow professionals learning new decision making techniques, the real stats on avalanche airbag packs, and leading research on understating probability. Next year's event looks to be even bigger and better. Mark your calendars—NSAW 2016 is scheduled for Sunday, October 23rd in our new venue, Town Hall Seattle—we look forward to seeing you there!



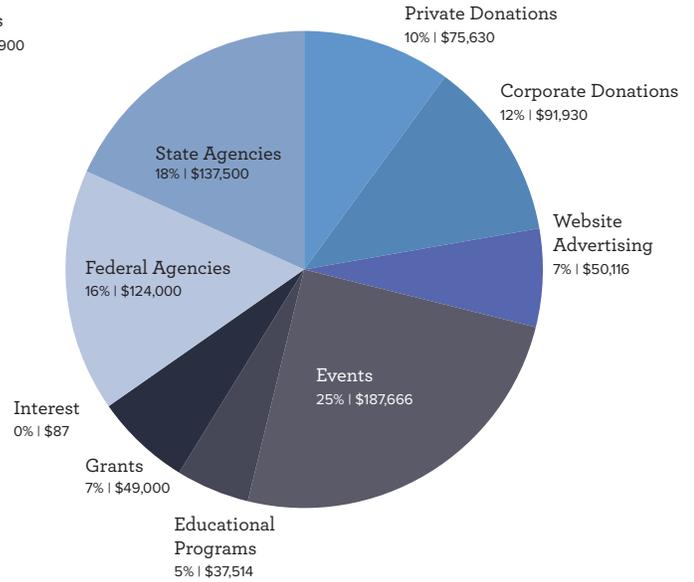
Photo: Eric Kennedy

Financial Statement

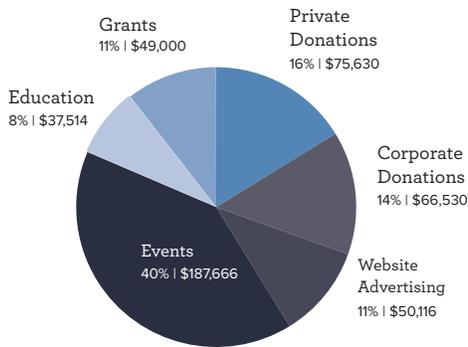
USFS Revenue Total = \$316,900



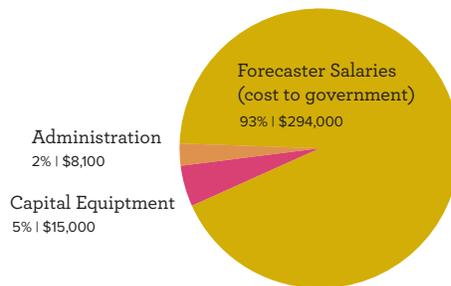
Combined Revenue Total = \$753,444



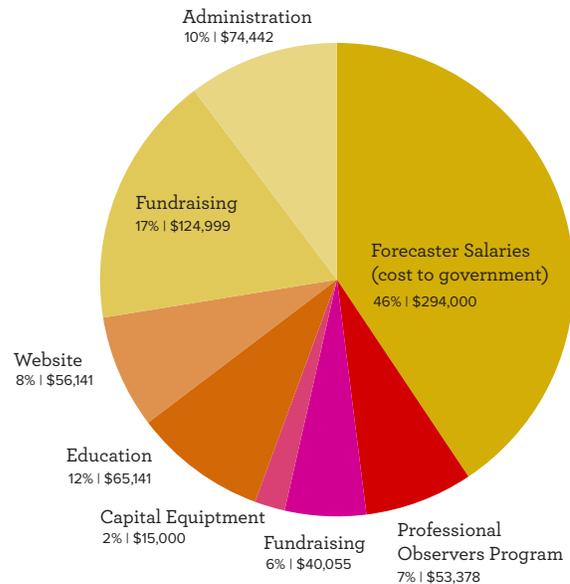
Non-Profit Revenue Total = 466,544



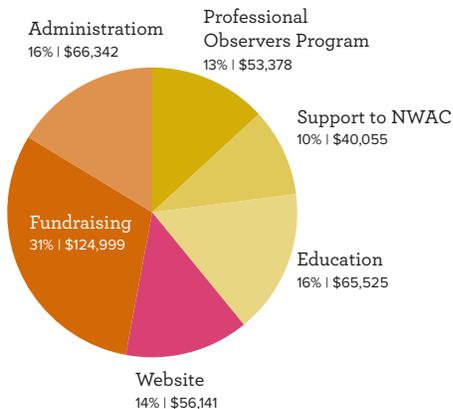
USFS Expenses Total = \$317,100



Combined Expenses Total = \$723,540



Non-Profit Expenses Total = \$406,440



The work of NWAC would not be possible without the support of the many companies and individuals who contributed time and money last season. We are truly grateful.

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Northwest Winter Sports Foundation



Corporate Sponsors



Corporate Sponsors

Extreme Hazard \$5000+

Black Diamond Equipment
Outdoor Research
Pyramid Brewing
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Scarpa
Mt Baker Ski Area
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Summit at Snoqualmie
REI
Mt Hood Meadows

High Hazard \$2000-\$5000

Eddie Bauer
Crystal Mountain Volunteer Ski Patrol
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Backcountry Access
Salewa North America
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Hydroflask
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Mt Baker Guides

Considerable Hazard \$1000-\$2000

Cascade Powder Cats
Waypoint Outdoor

G3
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Moderate Hazard \$500-\$1000

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Low Hazard <\$500

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Andrea Molitor
John Stimberis

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Gregg Morris	Monica Suydam	Rob Gray	Lizzie Sorrell	
Gregory Dronkert	Nicholas Tucker	Jaime Martz	Luke Jennings	
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**We sincerely apologize if we left anyone off these lists! If you donated your time or money last year but don't see your name, please shoot us an e-mail and we'll update our records.

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Charlie Beach
Josh Boyle
Phil Bruno
Cori Bucherl

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Kristina Ciari
John Collins
Mike Curran
Larina Davis

Ian Donovan
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Cheri Hingman
Jessica Kelley

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Nick Rustigian
Program Coordinator

Professional Observer Team



Jeff Hamblton
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Jeremy Allyn
Central Cascades West



Jeff Ward
Central-North Cascades East



Tom Curtis
Central-South Cascades East



CJ Svela
Mt Hood



Tyler Reid
Olympic Mountains



Katy Reid
Olympic Mountains