

# Avalanche Warning Criteria

## USDA Forest Service National Avalanche Center

Purpose of document: Promote **consistency** among US Avalanche Centers in how and when Avalanche Warnings are issued with some variations to account for unique populations in unique settings. Give the public a **clear understanding** of what an Avalanche Warning means. This document is not meant to encourage centers to issue warnings, watches, or other products if they do not already do so, but to provide a common framework if they choose to issue such products. Additionally, centers are encouraged to develop more specific criteria.

Purpose of Avalanche Warnings: The purpose is to **save lives** by alerting the public when avalanches are certain in many areas and when unusually dangerous avalanche conditions exist.

Agencies involved: Avalanche Warnings are communicated to the public and media, in part, through the National Weather Service. NWS coding is: AVW – Avalanche Warning, AVA – Avalanche Watch, SAB – Special Avalanche Bulletin.

Media involvement: Local and regional media help communicate Avalanche Warnings to the public. The specific warning message should be transmitted to them directly or via the NWS. It is desirable to ensure that a consistent message is communicated to the public through many different channels.

### Basic Content

1. Area covered by the Warning using common place names.
2. Duration of the Warning, including time of issuance and expiration.
3. Reason(s) for the Warning.
4. Instructions on how to obtain more information.
5. Text that is simple, clear, and concise using plain language, absent of jargon.

### Criteria:

1. Avalanche Warnings are ALWAYS issued when the avalanche danger is **EXTREME**.
2. Avalanche Warnings are issued when the avalanche danger is **HIGH in many areas**. Many areas can mean very large geographic areas. Many areas can also mean several aspects and/or elevations in a specific geographic area. Avalanche Warnings are typically NOT issued when the danger is HIGH in specific or isolated areas.
3. Avalanche Warnings can be issued when non-recreationalists or people who would not otherwise access the avalanche advisory are expected to be impacted.

### Additional criteria for Type III Avalanche Centers:

1. Type III centers do not issue avalanche advisories 7 days a week, but weather and snowpack conditions are typically monitored at regular and frequent intervals.

2. When Avalanche Warnings are issued by a Type III Avalanche Center, the most recent advisory should be updated or a new one issued. This advisory should contain additional information beyond what is contained in the Warning message.
3. When an Avalanche Warning is issued, conditions are monitored frequently until the Warning is terminated.

Additional criteria for Type IV Avalanche Centers:

1. Type IV avalanche centers do not monitor snowpack conditions and avalanche danger at regular and frequent intervals. As such, these centers do not issue avalanche warnings.

Areas not covered by an Avalanche Center

1. Avalanche Warnings are typically not issued for areas that are not covered by an avalanche center except by an adjacent Type I, II, or III Avalanche Center that is monitoring conditions in that area.
2. Avalanche Centers can contact centers in adjacent areas prior to or during avalanche warnings. This contact may aid discussions in whether or not to issue a warning for other areas. This contact can also help ensure a consistent message is transmitted to the public.

Timeframe for Avalanche Warnings:

1. Avalanche Warnings are issued with a clear start and end time.
2. Avalanche Warnings are updated or allowed to expire after 24 hours.
3. Avalanche Warnings can be reissued after a 24 hour period and can be reissued as many times as needed.

Other products - Avalanche Centers may also issue Avalanche Watches and/or Special Avalanche Statements. These are OPTIONAL products:

*Avalanche Watches:* The purpose of an Avalanche Watch is to warn the public that Avalanche Warning criteria are likely to be met in 24-48 hours.

*Special Avalanche Bulletins:* Special Avalanche Bulletins are impact-based products. These are issued by some avalanche centers when significant public use is expected and dangerous avalanche conditions exist, but the avalanche conditions do not meet the level necessary to issue an Avalanche Warning.

Areas covered by warnings:

US Avalanche Centers have defined areas in which they issue danger ratings. Avalanche Warnings are only issued for all or part of these areas because Centers have current snowpack data and observations for these areas. In special situations, Centers may choose additional areas in which they will issue Avalanche Warnings. When Centers choose to do so, they have a continuous record of data that ensures consistency and repeatability in issuing avalanche warnings for these outlying areas.