SNOWMOBILERS URGED TO BE MORE AVALANCHE AWARE

VICTORIA – A need for greater avalanche awareness within the snowmobiling community is one of the key findings in the BC Coroner Service’s Death Review Panel report into the deaths of 19 snowmobilers last winter.

In many of the fatalities the panel found the individuals had underestimated avalanche risks when faced with complex terrain and difficult snow conditions. The panel also noted among its key findings that snowmobile use has increased in recent years; modern machines allow riders to access more complex and vast terrain than ever before; and, there is a growing gap between snowmobilers and backcountry skiers in their respective levels of avalanche awareness and preparedness.

The panel made 15 recommendations aimed at preventing similar tragedies in the future including:

- Develop and deliver an avalanche awareness program in B.C. that is similar to the Government of Alberta’s Snowmobile Outreach Program.
- Distribute avalanche awareness materials at locations where operators register their snowmobiles in B.C. and Alberta.
- Increase the coverage and frequency of avalanche forecasts.
- Develop an avalanche terrain classification for popular snowmobiling areas.
- Snowmobile user groups form a joint committee and work with the CAC to raise avalanche awareness and cultivate a culture of avalanche safety within the snowmobiling community.
- Continue the development of the avalanche signage policy.

The recommendations are directed to various organizations including the Provincial Emergency Program (PEP), the BC Coroner’s Service (BCCS), the Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC), the Insurance Corporation of B.C. (ICBC), snowmobile manufacturers and the Government of Alberta.

During the winter of 2008/09, a total of 24 avalanche deaths were reported to the BCCS. Nineteen involved recreational snowmobilers, while the other five involved skiers and snowboarders. In light of this high number of fatalities, particularly among one user group, B.C.’s chief coroner convened a 16 member death review panel in November 2009. Panel members included subject matter experts, representatives from the commercial adventure tourism sector, avalanche safety professionals and members of the snowmobiling community.
The report is available online at:
http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/coroners/publications/index.htm

For more avalanche-related outdoor safety information, please visit
http://www.pep.bc.ca/hazard_preparedness/Avalanche_Information.html online.

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