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AVALANCHE TERRAIN OF THE LA SAL MOUNTAINS

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The La Sal Mountains of southeastern Utah are a high, spectacular range rising abruptly out of the surrounding desert canyons and mesas. Geologically, they are a Laccolithic Intrusion that was forced up through and between the many layers of sedimentary rock. Subsequent erosion and glaciation has exposed and carved this intruded material into beautiful peaks and circs. Mt. Peale, at 12,721 feet, is the highest peak in the range, as well as the Colorado Plateau. It is over eight and a half thousand feet higher than adjacent Moab.

The upper elevations of the La Sals receive large amounts of snow, with significant accumulations usually beginning in mid to late November. Snowfields in the high circs often last well into the summer months. Winter recreation opportunities are excellent and diverse in the range. The big elevation gain, several life zones, grand desert vistas, lot's of sunshine, and terrain of all kinds, are some of the contributing factors. This variety of terrain offers every level of difficulty in activities such as snowmobiling, snowshoeing, remote winter camping, tubing and sledding, as well as the many types of cross country skiing. Level meadows, rolling dirt roads, aspen groves, glades, thick dark woods, bowls, and chutes are all abundant. Plus, at times during the winter, snow related recreation even occurs in the canyons and mesas flanking the range.

This wonderful variety also includes a large amount of potential avalanche terrain on the upper half of the mountains. The La Sals receive a continental snowpack, which is fairly shallow compared to a coastal range, but is inherently weak because of several factors. This, combined with all the potential terrain, leads to avalanche activity of all types throughout the winter and spring season. The snowpack and character of this range are similar to that of the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado.

It is therefore necessary that the winter recreationist do all they can to minimize or completely avoid the risk. Predicting avalanches is a very complex science requiring careful study of the snowpack and weather, as well as the terrain characteristics; but you can effectively avoid avalanche danger by staying off of or not being directly below any potential areas. Most avalanches occur on slopes 30 to 45 degrees in steepness, but are not uncommon from 25 to 60 degrees. Primarily in spring snow conditions, slopes to under 20 degrees could avalanche and steeper areas tend to sluff off in smaller slides with each snowstorm. Completely open slopes offer the greatest potential, though avalanches can and do regularly occur in other areas. Open pockets in the woods, glades, steep ravines, and scattered trees are all likely candidates. Even denser woods may slide under the worst conditions. Most incidents and fatalities happen in these less obvious areas, as opposed to the bowls, chutes and avalanche paths.

Avoiding areas is certainly effective, but obviously limits your opportunities. These topographical maps showing you the potential terrain can help you to avoid or to know when you are entering areas that could slide. There are two keys, one tracing the major road routes for winter recreation, showing if there is any avalanche potential and the second covering the off road areas. In both cases there is a rating for moderate and high potential. High covers those areas most likely to slide, such as steep above timberline

country, avalanche starting zones and paths, and other steep open or thinly treed areas. Moderate covers areas that will generally require a worst and less likely scenario for a slide to occur, such as lower elevation or lower angle areas, thicker tree cover, or the low angle runout zones of avalanche paths. Several factors were involved in boundary delimitation so you may see similar terrain with different ratings. Remember that other isolated spots may exist and that if heavy snows occur at the lower elevations, some hazard could develop there. Also, I want to stress that just because the terrain has potential, that does not mean it is going to avalanche. On the contrary, many areas will only be hazardous a few days during the season, ranging up to some slopes being ready to slide for a majority of the winter. The point I'm trying to make is that terrain is only one factor and is of limited value to the person wanting to travel in the areas with potential. If you are planning such a journey, the more training, experience and information you have the better. Study these maps for your area and be sure to call our avalanche hotline, which gives you current information on the snowpack and avalanche hazard, snow conditions and depths, access road conditions, and the mountain weather forecast. This is updated every evening for the following day. The number is (801) 259-SNOW. You or a member in your party should have training in route finding and safe travel techniques through avalanche country, snow pit and weather analysis. All members should carry and be well practiced in the use of rescue transceivers, shovels and probe poles. Courses in the above are available all over the west during the winter, including one in Moab offered through Canyonlands Field Institute. We also have an excellent 30 minute video called "Avalanche Awareness, A Question Of Balance" which you are welcome to watch. Please ask for or call me if you have any other questions. Enjoy the wonder of the La Sal Mountains in winter and make it a safe trip.

## Winter Ski Areas and Avalanche Areas

### I. Gold Basin Area - Counterclockwise Starting at Base

- A) Norelaga's Face
- B) Northwoods 1
- C) Exxon's Folly
- D) Northwoods 2
- E) Northwoods 3
- F) Little Tukno Path
- G) Big Tukno Path
- H) Tele-Heaven
- I) Tele-Gold
- J) Red Snow Circ (Circ 1)
- K) Mt. Tuk Circ (Circ 2)
- L) Lone Spruce Run
- M) Talking Mountain Circ (Circ 3)
- N) Mt. Laurel Circ (Circ 4)
- O) Gold Miner's Gully
- P) The Funnel
- Q) Overflow Run
- R) Laurel Highway
  - 1. Laurel Meadows
  - 2. Laurel Aspens
  - 3. Julie's Glade
  - 4. Pecos Ridge and Northwoods
  - 5. Pre Laurel (Sunshine Pt. or other?)

### II. Horse Creek Area

- A) Horse Creek Circ
- B) Pinto Glades
- C) Arabian Northwoods
- D) Junction Meadow South
- E) Junction Meadow North

### III. Geyser Pass Area

- A) Geyser Bowl
- B) Chair 11
- C) NF Mellenthin
- D) Moonlight Meadows
- E) Colorado Bowl
- F) Tomasaki Bowl

### IV. Dark Canyon Area

- A) Unknown Circ
- B) Dark Canyon Circ
- C) DC Big Dog
- D) East Face Fellow

### V. Dorry Canyon

- A) NW Direct Glades
- B) Corkscrew Glades