Browns Basin Near Miss

January 14, 2014

Chugach Mountains near Valdez, Alaska

Summary: One rider from an experienced four-member snowmachine group was caught in a hard-slab avalanche triggered from a ridgeline above the riders in higher terrain. The snowmachiner was able to deploy his airbag prior to being carried 1200 feet by the slide. He was fully buried and sustained leg injuries, although recovered by his group. The snowmachine was totalled.

Background Weather and Snow Conditions

Rain on snow event, rapid rise in temperature

Terrain Factors

Stopping their snowmachines on a glacial bench in order to examine an exposed glacial feature of a very large collapsed ice cave. This large channeled ice feature with tall, vertical walls lay in the fall line of steeper higher complexed terrain.  However, mid field of the glacier, the group was not directly stopped in steep terrain.

The Accident

A group of four local riders who had visited this area in previous years. It is not know what equipment each rider carried. No indication of natural avalanche activity or instability was noticed by the any members of the group on the ride in. The riders parked their machines when they reached their intended destination at the collapsed ice cave. The avalanche above the group was spotted while Rider ‘A’ was returning to his snowmachine, which was parked facing uphill. He shouted to the group and was able, with difficulty, to ride off of the flanks of the moving slab. Rider ‘B’ was unable to clear his sled from the glacier ice features, effectively acting as a terrain trap. The rider was briefly able to hide behind and cling to an ice boulder as the initial blast of snow enveloped the ice channel, but he was ultimately flushed through it along with slab debris and large ice chunks. While being hurtled through the flow, Rider B pulled the handle activating his avalanche airbag. He was carried 1200 feet across the glacier until the debris stopped moving. The remaining riders were able to stay clear of the avalanche as it ran out.

The Rescue

The remaining 3 group members quickly located Rider B whose hands and forearms were visible in the debris field. The fully-buried victim was breathing and conscious although completely immobilized at a 45 degree angle. The excavation took approximately 10-15 minutes. Rider B credits his avalanche airbag for keeping him on the surface of the debris. The extent of his injuries was severely torn ligaments in one knee. The damaged sled was found and later recovered by helicopter.

The Avalanche

Uncertain trigger, possible cornice collapse. Started near the ridge line, several hundred feet above the group and ran out onto the glacier below. Dimensions of the slide are unknown.