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Canadian Avalanche Centre Warns Backcountry Users About New Smartphone Apps

Apps marketed as transceivers give users false sense of protection

Oct 24, 2013, Revelstoke, BC: Smartphone avalanche search applications that are marketed as avalanche rescue systems are not recommended, says the Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC). Three European-made apps are presenting themselves as economical alternatives to avalanche transceivers, the electronic device used by backcountry users to find buried companions in case of an avalanche.

After close examination, the CAC has found a number of issues with the technology. Two of the main issues are compatibility and frequency range. All avalanche transceivers conform to an international standard of 457 kHz. Regardless of the brand, all transceivers can be used to search and find other transceivers. "Not only are these new apps incapable of connecting with other avalanche transceivers, they are also incompatible between themselves, so one type of app can't find another," explains CAC Executive Director Gilles Valade.

The 457 kHz standard was chosen because it transmits very well through dense snow, is not deflected by objects such as trees and rocks, and is accurate. "None of the various communication methods used by these apps come close to that standard," adds Valade. "WiFi and Bluetooth signals are significantly weakened when passing through snow, and easily deflected by the solid objects we expect to see in avalanche debris. And the accuracy of a GPS signal is nowhere near the precision required for finding an avalanche victim. "

Other critical issues include battery life, robustness, reliability and interference. "These apps are being actively marketed as software that turns a smartphone into an avalanche transceiver but the CAC has serious concerns about their vulnerabilities," says Valade. "We are warning all backcountry users to not use any of these apps in place of an avalanche transceiver."

The three apps are:

- iSis Intelligent (Mountain) Rescue System http://www.isis-application.com/en/
- Snøg Avalanche Buddy: http://www.avalanchebuddy.com/
- SnoWhere: http://charcoalfrost.com/

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