

Experts to dissect Mother Nature's snowy dangers

By Susan Wood

When author Jennifer Woodlief wrote acknowledgements in her book "A Wall of White" about the 1982 Alpine Meadows-area avalanche that killed seven, she thanked snow expert Jim Plehn for explaining the difference "between a snowflake and a pure stellar crystal."

This kind of knowledge goes a long way in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, where a freak storm can mean the difference between living or dying, and a wet, heavy layer on top of ball-bearing soft flakes can turn a good time in the wilderness into a scary day.

Just ask the avalanche forecasters and controllers about the Lake Tahoe region. It is challenging terrain because the masses tend to show up on skis, boards and snowshoes for this world-renowned resort area – turned winter wonderland to ride the slippery surface.



The deadly 1982 Alpine Meadows avalanche will be discussed at this month's snow

science
symposium.

And because more people who play in it test the backcountry each year, the masses of snow experts trained to protect and rescue them are booking reservations for the 2010 International Snow Science Symposium. More than 900 attendees are expected to turn out for the Oct. 17-22 workshop at Resort at Squaw Creek.

Woodlief will speak next Monday at 8:30pm in the resort's Grand Sierra Ballroom about her book's account of Alpine's monumental snowstorm and subsequent massive slab avalanche that roared over and buried buildings and people. The worst avalanche in Tahoe history occurred a few miles from the conference.

The public is invited to the talk, without registering for the conference. The conference costs \$325 for five days. Attendees may also sign up for individual days.

A slew of subjects will be covered ranging from snow stability and thermal photography to snowpack properties and the state of the explosives industry. The lecture halls will give way each day to field observations and a social agenda. Product demonstrations will also be on hand.

One example: There's an avalanche airbag of sorts that can deploy like a parachute from a pack for a snow rider to float to the surface of a moving avalanche. Another featured device, which looks like a snorkel, allows a buried skier or hiker to breathe under snow.

"We think for the regular recreationalist, there is value," said Lel Tone, the event chairwoman and Squaw Valley ski patroller.

While novices make not understand the subject matter, workers in the field may be joined by the growing number who venture

into the conditions that command expert technology and information.

Mike Laney, event registration chairman and avalanche program director for the National Ski Patrol System, believes increased development in mountain towns with increased interest among people to tread into avalanche-prone areas makes these conferences necessary and crucial to risk managers, patrollers, search-and-rescue volunteers, land-use managers and scientists. Laney is a retired science teacher.

The mantra of the symposium, Laney explained, is “merging theory with practice.”

“I’ve had a few close calls in the wilderness, none of which would have been helped with modern technology, but almost all would have been avoided if I knew what I know now,” Laney told *Lake Tahoe News*.