

Vail Resorts adds air bags to patrollers' bucket of tools

By Colin Bane, ESPN.com

Ski patrollers and avalanche control technicians at Vail Resorts properties in Colorado, including Vail, Beaver Creek, and Keystone, and at California's Kirkwood Mountain Resort, will now be equipped with airbag backpacks, which are designed to help keep wearers afloat and reduce the risk of trauma in the case of an avalanche.

"The safety of our employees and our guests are paramount at Vail Resorts and we are constantly looking at ways to help provide them with as-safe-as-possible environment at our resorts," says Blaise Carrig, president of the Mountain Division at Vail Resorts, regarding the recent purchase. "The BCA airbags are currently being evaluated by our resorts' ski patrol for snow control work and broader uses at our resorts."

The Vail patrollers will be outfitted with Backcountry Access Float 30 packs.

"Vail Resorts isn't the first, but it's certainly symbolic for other ski areas to see the biggest resort company in North America purchasing airbags for its ski patrols," said Bruce Edgerly, co-owner of Backcountry Access (BCA), a Colorado-based manufacturer of avalanche airbag pack devices and other safety equipment. "It's a standard best practice in the ski industry to equip your workers with the top safety equipment, and that increasingly includes avalanche airbag systems designed to help skiers caught in avalanches."

As of this season, fleets of airbag systems from manufacturers including BCA, Mammut, Snowpulse, and ABS Avalanche Airbag Systems are also in place for ski patrollers at U.S. ski areas including Aspen, Jackson Hole, Loveland, Mission Ridge, Mount

Baker, Telluride, Snowbird, and Wolf Creek, among others. Several heli-skiing operations – including Alaska’s Chugach Powder Guides and British Columbia’s Eagle Pass Heli-Skiing, Selkirk Tangiers Heli-Skiing, and Northern Escape Heli-Skiing – also now equip their guides with airbags and provide them to clients.

This week, two in-bounds avalanche fatalities occurred, the first of the 2012-13 season. On Monday, veteran ski patroller Bill Foster, 53, died while doing planned avalanche mitigation work at Alpine Meadows ski area following heavy snows in the area, and snowboarder Steven Mark Anderson, 49, was buried under 2 to 3 feet of snow at Donner Ski Ranch. Neither were wearing airbag packs, according to initial reports.

Edgerly says that while there’s no one panacea answer to the avalanche problem, there’s a growing body of raw data and anecdotal evidence supporting claims that airbags can help in worst-case situations like Monday’s slides.

Skier Daron Rahlves deployed an airbag in a backcountry slide in Alaska’s Northern Chugach Range last season while filming with Teton Gravity Research and said, “It definitely saved my life.”

Snowboarder Meesh Hytner was filmed floating to safety with a BCA pack in January after getting caught in a backcountry slab slide near Montezuma, Colo. And pro skier Elyse Saugstad, a survivor of the much-publicized avalanche that claimed three lives on Stevens Pass in Washington last February, credits her survival to the pack made by German manufacturer ABS.

Sales of airbag devices spiked after the Stevens Pass slide and have remained steady ever since, Edgerly says.

“Airbags are certainly no substitute for good mountain sense and education, and we would never suggest that you can get away with anything more with an airbag than you would without,” Edgerly cautions. “The first step, to be sure, is

getting educated. If you're a ski patroller doing any kind of avalanche control work or working around avalanche-prone terrain, I think it's a no-brainer to add an airbag bag to your toolkit."