

# Fresh.

(trends)

Improved gear and a marketing push to a wider range of skiers has helped the heli-ski industry grow. In the U.S., that growth might lead to a more rigorous oversight of the sport. Here skiers with Eagle Pass Heliski, near Revelstoke, B.C., wait for the bird to clear before pushing off.

## Heli-Skiing Regulations to Take Flight?

AFTER SEVERAL FATALITIES, THE U.S. HELI-SKIING INDUSTRY WORKS TO STANDARDIZE SAFETY PROTOCOLS—BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT DOES. *By Devon O'Neil*

For nearly 50 years, the American heli-skiing industry has operated like a man who lives on a deserted island. Which is to say: by its own rules. Aside from local, state, and federal land agencies that issue permits to the operators and periodically attempt to keep tabs on them, there has never been any blanket regulation of heli-skiing in the United States. So long as you stay inside your permit boundaries and keep your clients—and guides—safe, chances are you rarely will be hassled—or scrutinized.

But a push to regulate such a potentially deadly pastime has always been imminent. Industry watchers surmised that all it would take to trigger such a development would be a few high-profile accidents. And that's exactly what happened. A pair of accidents in Haines, Alaska, one in March 2012, the other in March 2013, took the lives of two

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guides and one client and have brought new attention to the sport—not just in Alaska but also throughout the country. U.S. senators and land agencies are taking note, spurred by a victim's parents. There's talk of “getting everyone on the same sheet of music,” as Department of Natural Resources regional manager Rick Thompson said from Anchorage.

Amid the clamoring for outside oversight, a group of heli-ski company owners is looking to preempt that move and has rallied to regulate the industry from within. The Heli Ski US Association, a nonprofit loosely founded in the 1980s and later formalized, is driving the efforts. Heli US, as it is called, is attempting to expand its organization and create a unified voice and uniform set of safety guidelines.

The incident that brought the heli-skiing regulation talk to the fore occurred on March 13, 2012. Flying with Alaska Heliskiing, Nikolay Dodov, a 26-year-old snowboarder from Truckee, Calif., dropped in to an alpine bowl outside Haines, Alaska, at 10:15 a.m., triggering an avalanche 800 feet wide. The slide thundered 3,500 feet down the mountain and buried Dodov and his guide, Rob Liberman, killing them both.



REGIFTED

» Sun Valley terrain-park chief Brian Callahan delivers the goods to kids, naughty and nice, all winter, so he decided to dress the part and take flight on one of his hits. No sleigh required.

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In the subsequent months, Dodov's parents, Natalia and Alex, investigated the incident relentlessly. "We know that our son Nick's death could have been prevented had there been stricter guidelines imposed," the Dodovs wrote in a January 2013 open letter to Alaska's two United States senators, and other officials, asking for an investigation into their son's death, the standardization of safety regulations, improved safety gear, and mandatory drug screening for heli-skiing staff, among other demands. Alaska Heliskiing, which declined to comment, was fined \$750 for failing to report an employee's death within eight hours.

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People both inside and outside the industry view the case as a potential tipping point for the establishment of governmental oversight if the Dodovs take their case to court. But the Dodovs are not committed to litigation. Natalia Dodov said recently that before she and her husband file a lawsuit, they want to see whether the heli-skiing industry itself will standardize safety and search-and-rescue protocols, thus assuring that their son's death effected meaningful change. "If the justice system is the only way to change the safety standards," Dodov said, "in the end we will file wrongful death."

Heli-skiing has been the ultimate buzz for adventuresome skiers since Hans Gmoser realized that a helicopter was the perfect ski lift, launching commercial heli-skiing in British Columbia's Bugaboo Range in the mid-1960s. With the cost of heli-skiing starting at \$5,000 a week—and often more than double that—operators feel an unspoken pressure from clients to get what they paid for. Roughly 10,000 people heli-ski annually in the U.S., and more than 30,000 in Canada, says Points North founder Kevin Quinn, who was elected Heli US president in May. Heli-related fatalities remain rare,

and account for a small percentage of the average of 25 U.S. avalanche deaths per year in the past 10 years.

Nearly 20 outfitters are either members or prospective members of Heli US. That's about half the total number of American heli-ski companies. (To become a member, a company must spend two years on probation, pay \$3,000 and pass a rigorous peer-safety review.) In past years there has been friction between members and non-members, with members unwilling to share their Heli-Ski Safety Operating Guidelines (HSOGs), seeing them as proprietary, and providing a clear competitive edge.

But this fall, in the wake of the two accidents and the rise in scrutiny, the association decided for the first time to release its HSOGs. "We've been sitting on these guidelines for so long, they're so good, why are we guarding them?" Quinn says. "People are going to start up heli operations. Great. But let's make sure they're doing it properly. Because if the worst-case scenario happens, we're all affected by it."

The prospect of governmental oversight isn't popular with either public or private interests. "The industry should drive this," says Denton Hamby, outdoor recreation planner with the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska. "We're a land-management agency."

Heli-skiing has always been a dangerous game; insurance companies treat it like bungee jumping. (A typical policy required by the BLM calls for \$10 million in liability coverage.) No set of safety guidelines can eliminate the risk.

Imraan Aziz, a 44-year-old designer from San Francisco, believes the industry should be regulated from within. He has heli-skied in Alaska and British Columbia, and takes the time to research companies and guides before booking. "I want to get after it as much as the next guy," he says, "but no government certification is going to make me feel as good as knowing that my guide is recognized by his peers for being a good mountain guide." ●



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