

State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 14, 2018

State scientist awarded avalanche research fellowship

(Fairbanks, AK) – Dr. Gabriel Wolken of the Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys has been awarded an international research fellowship to study and map Alaska’s snow avalanche hazards. The six-month fellowship beginning September 1 in Davos, Switzerland, promotes collaboration between visiting senior-level scientists and the Swiss Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research.

Snow avalanches are a clear threat to public safety, infrastructure and commerce in Alaska, and climate change is expected to increase Alaska’s vulnerability. In the past 20 years, snow avalanches have caused 85 deaths in Alaska – the most frequent cause of death in Alaska from a natural hazard. Thirty percent of Alaska’s total area is at risk from snow avalanches. With infrastructure development planned in many parts of Alaska and subsistence and outdoor recreation a way of life for most Alaskans, the state has much to gain from improved understanding of snow avalanche hazards.

Wolken manages the Climate & Cryosphere Hazards Program at DGGs and is affiliated with the Alaska Climate Adaptation Science Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He investigates the impacts of changes in snow, ice, and permafrost on Alaska’s landscape, natural resources, and the built environment.

“Baseline avalanche hazard information is missing in much of the state. As the climate continues to change, it becomes increasingly important for us to understand how and where snow avalanche hazards will change throughout the state,” Wolken said.

“This fellowship and long-term collaboration with international scientists will lead to important advances in Alaska avalanche research, help the State of Alaska develop science-based adaptation and response strategies to avalanches, and improve community resilience in a changing climate,” said Steve Masterman, director of the Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys.

This focus on statewide avalanche hazards aligns with Governor Walker's recent Administrative Order 289, which established the Alaska Climate Change Strategy and directed the Climate Action for Alaska Leadership Team and state agencies to consider and develop climate actions in the areas of adaptation, mitigation, research, and response.

All travel expenses for the fellowship will be paid for by the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow, and Landscape Research.

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