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CR-148523

TECHNICAL REPORT STANDARD TITLE PAGE

1. Report No.	2. Government Accession No.	3. Recipient's Catalog No.
4. Title and Subtitle Application of LANDSAT Data to Delimitation of Avalanche Hazards in Montane Colorado		5. Report Date June, 1976
		6. Performing Organization Code
7. Author(s) D.H. Knepper		8. Performing Organization Report No.
9. Performing Organization Name and Address Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research University of Colorado Boulder, Colorado 80309		10. Work Unit No.
		11. Contract or Grant No.
		13. Type of Report and Period Covered Type II Progress Report: 3/76–5/76
12. Sponsoring Agency Name and Address NASA Goddard Space Flight Center Greenbelt, Maryland 20771		
		14. Sponsoring Agency Code
15. Supplementary Notes		

16. Abstract

Snow avalanche information derived directly from Landsat imagery and indirectly from small-scale topographic maps is being used to map the location and distribution of avalanche hazards in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. A preliminary investigation of the usefulness of Landsat imagery for mapping landslide areas suggests that Landsat imagery alone is not sufficient for distinguishing between landslide and non-landslide areas with a high degree of accuracy.

17. Key Words (Selected by Author(s)) avalanche, landslide, LANDSAT, Colorado	18. Distribution Statement		
19. Security Classif. (of this report) unclassified	20. Security Classif. (of this page) unclassified	21. No. of Pages 10	22. Price*

*For sale by the Clearinghouse for Federal Scientific and Technical Information, Springfield, Virginia 22151.

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APPLICATION OF LANDSAT DATA TO DELIMITATION OF

AVALANCHE HAZARDS IN MONTANE COLORADO

Daniel H. Knepper

Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research

University of Colorado

Boulder, Colorado 80309

Contributors: D.H. Knepper

R. Summer

D. Sauchyn

N. Trench

June 1976

Interim Report for Period March 1976 – May 1976

Fourth Quarterly Progress Report

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PREFACE

Over the last several years, the Institute of Arctic and Alpine
Research (INSTAAR) at the University of Colorado has been involved in
the delineation, mapping, and analysis of natural hazards in selected
portions of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Much of this research has
been concerned with the detailed delineation of snow avalanche hazards
using air photo and field mapping techniques. Continuous monitoring of
various environmental parameters during the winter avalanche cycle has
produced significant advances in the field of avalanche prediction and
forecasting for local areas.

In June 1975, INSTAAR began research for the National Aeronautics
and Space Administration (NASA contract NAS5-20914) on a new approach to
avalanche hazard investigation. The purpose of this research is to analyze,
evaluate, and apply LANDSAT imagery for delineating and mapping avalanche
hazards in the Colorado mountains. Research is currently being directed
toward six primary objectives:

(1) Compilation and analysis of historical avalanche records for
    cause/effect and frequency information.

(2) Identification of avalanche hazard terrain characteristics
    detectable on LANDSAT imagery.

(3) Determination of relative usefulness of LANDSAT imagery for
    avalanche hazard mapping.

(4) Determination of useful schemes for cartographically representing
    avalanche hazards.

(5) Using the synoptic and repetative aspects of LANDSAT imagery for
    regional avalanche hazard mapping and analysis.

(6) Examining the cost/benefits of avalanche hazard investigations.
Secondary, and purely experimental, objectives of the research project
are as follows:

(1) Investigation of potential usefulness of LANDSAT derived information
as input to avalanche forecast or warning systems.

(2) Investigation of the usefulness of LANDSAT imagery for mapping
major landslide areas.

During the report period (1 March - 31 May 1976), research was
conducted by two full-time staff members and two part-time graduate student
research assistants. Emphasis was placed on (1) applying the adopted
mapping technique to avalanche hazard mapping in the Montrose and Leadville
quadrangles (1:250,000) and (2) a preliminary investigation of the
usefulness of LANDSAT imagery as a tool for the delineation of major
landslide areas in the Colorado Rocky Mountains.

Regional mapping of avalanche hazards has, to a large extent, become
a routine process, and as the interpreters gain experience, the mapping
proceeds rapidly and proficiently. Landslide mapping, however, is still
very tentative. Although many landslide areas can be identified and mapped
on LANDSAT imagery, others show no imagery expression that allows positive
identification to be made. Reliance on the use of LANDSAT imagery as the
sole source for mapping information, therefore, is not recommended.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the work conducted by the Institute of
Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR), University of Colorado, during
the period 1 March – 31 May 1976, under contract NAS5-20914 to the
National Aeronautics and Space Administration/Goddard Space Flight
Center.

During the report period, snow avalanche hazard mapping was
conducted in the Montrose and Leadville quadrangles (1:250,000)
using Landsat imagery and the small-scale topographic information
contained on the quadrangle sheets. The mapping technique, described
in the previous progress report, works very well, and as experience
is gained, it becomes relatively fast. One man-month was also spent
investigating the usefulness of Landsat imagery for delineating the
regional distribution of landslide areas in the Colorado Rocky
Mountains. Preliminary results indicate that Landsat imagery alone
is not sufficient for locating all major landslide areas.

REGIONAL AVALANCHE MAPPING

Landsat imagery, in conjunction with selected supplementary information, is being used to prepare a snow avalanche hazard map of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. The initial mapping is being conducted and compiled at a scale of 1:250,000. This information will be compiled on a 1:500,000 topographic map of Colorado when the interpretation phase of the work is completed.

To reach this point, INSTAAR has expended much time and effort in evaluating Landsat imagery for avalanche mapping in order to better understand its capabilities and limitations and to define any types of additional information necessary for the accurate interpretation of the imagery in situations where the Landsat imagery alone is inadequate. The result is a technique that involves the visual interpretation of Landsat imagery and the human analysis of the elevation and relief factors that appear to be most critical in determining the avalanche hazard associated with an area. The technique is practical, relatively accurate, and does not rely on sophisticated (and expensive) imagery or data processing. However, portions of the technique could be easily adapted to automatic computer methods if the digital relief and elevation data are available in sufficient detail.

The Technique

The technique being used to map avalanche hazards in the Colorado mountains was described in the previous progress report. Three levels of avalanche hazard are mapped, each succeeding level being more specific on the location of hazards and more definite on the existance of active avalanche terrain. The lowest level consists of the definition of Poten ial Avalanche Terrain based on the presence of elevation (climatic) and relief

factors that could be conducive to avalanching. The intermediate level
is Interpreted Avalanche Terrain. This is terrain that is interpreted to
be active during the winter and spring avalanche cycle because of its
appearence on Landsat imagery. The highest level of avalanche hazard is
Identified Avalanche Terrain, which consists of areas that are known to
avalanche as determined by air photo interpretation, historical records,
published maps, or personal observations. A completed map expresses avalanche
hazard as actual or potential and provides the reader with the information
necessary to evaluate the reliability of what is shown on the map. A detailed,
step-by-step description of the procedures that were found to be most
efficient will be included in the final report.

Preliminary Evaluation

To date, evaluation of the mapping technique has been done by visually
inspecting the hazard maps in areas where the mappers have a degree of
familiarity. These checks have indicated that the mapping technique does
a good job of depicting the avalanche hazards, even at the small scale.
However, work is underway that will allow a more quantitative evaluation
of mapping accuracy and completeness to be made. A field team, working
under NASA Grant NGL 06-003-200, is currently preparing detailed snow
avalanche and geologic hazards maps (1:24,000) of the northern part of
Hinsdale County, Colorado. These maps will be made available at the end of
the summer field season so that direct comparisons with the Landsat-
derived hazard map can be made for this previously-unmapped area.

Since the interpretation of avalanche hazards on Landsat imagery is
influenced by the experience of the interpreter, a test will be conducted to

evaluate the variability in avalanche hazard on Landsat imagery is influenced by the experience of the interpreter, a test will be conducted to evaluate the variability in avalanche hazard mapping conducted by different workers. Two areas will be independently mapped by two investigators. The resulting maps will be compared to determine the amount and type of variation in avalanche hazard mapping caused by different interpreters.

Between 2 and 4 weeks will be spent during the next report period checking selected areas in the field. The areas to be checked have been interpreted as avalanche areas, but there is no documented avalanche activity. These areas are primarily in the backcountry and, thus, present little actual hazard, but they provide areas in which to check the accuracy and correctness of the interpretation procedure.

Status

The Landsat-derived avalanche hazards maps are being compiled on the 1:250,000, 2-degree topographic quadrangle maps that cover the state. Two of these quadrangles are complete (Durange and Montrose) and two are near completion (Leadville and Craig). The remaining mountainous area in the state is contained on four quadrangle maps, however, only one-half of this area is within the mountains, so an equivalent of two more quadrangles remains to be done. When these are completed, the avalanche hazard mapping will be transferred to a 1:500,000 topographic map of Colorado.

IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR LANDSLIDE AREAS

A secondary objective of this project was to examine the possible usefulness of Landsat imagery as a tool for mapping major landslide areas in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. During this report period, two graduate student research assistants, David J. Sauchyn and Nicholas R. Trench, each spent one month investigating the problem. They have submitted a preliminary report on their work, but since they desire to spend two more weeks on the study, the results of their work will not be reported until the final report. A summary of the preliminary results is given below.

Some landslide areas in Colorado can be identified and delimited on Landsat imagery, but because of the extreme variations in the topographic, lithologic, structural, and vegetational conditions associated with landslide areas, there is no unique spectral or spatial pattern that is indicative of landslides.

The accuracy with which landslides can be mapped is a function of the degree to which the landslides are expressed in the relief and the topography. Many landslide areas in Colorado, both large and small, simply do not have enough surface expression to be interpreted. Consequently, Landsat imagery is not recommended as a routine landslide mapping tool, particularly if higher resolution imagery or photography is available.

However, some areas of landsliding displayed characteristic evidence that would be obvious to even the casual observer. This suggests that in areas where landsliding is large-scale, where other geologic conditions are relatively uniform, and where there is a need for frequent monitoring of landslide activity, Landsat imagery may be the best tool available.

PUBLICATIONS

No project-funded publications were prepared during the report period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

No specific recommendations are necessary at this time.