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Probabilistic avalanche runout modelling for daily risk management of traffic routes

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Abstract. In alpine regions, snow avalanches endanger infrastructure such as roads, ski slopes and buildings. While permanent protection measures minimize avalanche impact, local experts must implement additional safety measures such as road or ski slope closures during critical situations. To support this demanding decision-making process, we propose a framework that can be used on a daily basis to calculate avalanche probability indication maps of potential avalanche runout extents and intensities. The probability indication maps are generated by running multiple avalanche simulations, based on an ensemble of estimations of input parameters derived from weather station measurements and weather forecasts, to assess a range of possible scenarios, e.g. for fracture depth, maximum erosion depth and snow temperature. We aim to identify the minimum number of input parameters needed to meaningfully represent daily snowpack conditions. In this project, we focus on cold snow conditions that produce powder snow avalanches. To evaluate the quality of the proposed probability indication maps, we conduct a hindcast for four well-documented avalanche events around Davos, Switzerland, using meteorological station data from the day before the avalanches released, weather forecast and SNOWPACK simulations. For validation we compare the resulting predictions to the measured outlines of the avalanche cores. This study demonstrates how real-time weather and snowpack data can be utilized effectively to provide practitioners with an overview of the current avalanche situation to support their decision-making process. In the future, such approaches could be implemented into more data-based decision-making processes to better protect traffic infrastructure in high-risk avalanche hazard areas.

1 INTRODUCTION

To ensure safe living and travel in mountain regions during the winter season, effective avalanche protection systems are essential (Rudolf-Miklau et al., 2015). However, continuously protecting infrastructure such as roads, railways, power lines, and ski runs is not feasible due to financial restrictions and the need to preserve the natural landscape (Nadim et al., 2006). In such cases, safety protocols define the operational procedures to evaluate avalanche danger and deciding whether traffic routes can remain open, have to be temporarily closed, and require active control measures, such as artificial avalanche releases. These

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safety protocols currently rely on avalanche forecasts, measurement networks, and expert knowledge (Rice et al., 2002; Bründl et al., 2018). However, climate-driven shifts to snowpack conditions and avalanche hazard, coupled with generational turnover among avalanche safety practitioners, are making experience-based decision-making in avalanche safety increasingly difficult to sustain. (Kotlarski et al., 2023; Eckert et al., 2024; Mayer et al., 2023; Ortner et al., 2025). Meanwhile, advances in real-time monitoring, data integration and artificial intelligence–based approaches are transforming and providing growing support for operational decision-making (Farestveit et al., 2024; Turquet et al., 2024).

Avalanche hazard maps are a central tool in natural hazard management and form the basis for long-term planning and safety protocols. They provide a spatial representation of avalanche intensity, including impact pressure, velocity, flow height, and runout extent, thereby identifying areas that are repeatedly exposed to avalanches. Hazard maps are mainly intended for inhabited areas and not for all road sections. In Switzerland, avalanche hazard maps are traditionally based on discrete return periods (10, 30, 100 and 300 years) assigned to specific snow accumulation scenarios. Hazard maps are developed from historical event records and are increasingly complemented by numerical simulation tools for avalanche dynamics, such as RAMMS::Avalanche (Christen et al., 2010), SamosAT (Sampl, 2007), AvaFlow (Mergili et al., 2017), OpenFOAM (Rauter and Kowalski, 2024), MoT-Voellmy (Vicari et al., 2025), and ELBA (Keiler et al., 2006). The calculated avalanche intensities depend on topography, snow and weather conditions, and vegetation cover (McClung and Schaerer, 2006). After the extreme avalanche winter of 1999 in Switzerland, the Swiss government strengthened its organizational risk management framework to better translate hazard information into operational measures, with a focus on the coordination and procedures of road closures (Bründl et al., 2004).

Beyond spatial hazard maps, several methods have been developed to systematize hazard assessment by explicitly integrating terrain, snowpack, and meteorological information. The Avalanche-Hazard Index (AHI) (Schaerer, 1989) and the Wilhelm method (Wilhelm, 1998) are widely used in the United States for systematic avalanche risk assessment. The AHI quantifies avalanche danger by integrating snowpack stability, terrain characteristics, and meteorological factors into a standardized hazard score. In contrast, the Wilhelm method relies more on qualitative field observations and records of past avalanche activity to classify slope-specific risk, thereby complementing the numerical framework of the AHI for the hazard map creation.

In many regions, particularly those with large and sparsely populated areas, traditional hazard mapping is constrained by the scarcity of comprehensive historical avalanche databases, motivating the increasing use of automated and model-based methods. A critical first step in adopting these approaches is to identify spatial and temporal hotspots; where and when avalanches are likely to occur. Hotspots can be identified using terrain based analysis models by (Bühler et al., 2018; Ganju and Dimri, 2004) or by analysing historical event records (Pop et al., 2025). Bühler et al. (2022) developed an approach to generate large scale hazard indication maps (LSHIM), consistent with the Swiss approach used for hazard mapping. In Norway, a region independent systems NAtural hazard Knowledge System for INundation and avalanches (NAKSIN) has been developed to produce Avalanche Hazard Indication Maps (AHIMs) by automatically identifying potential release areas, estimating avalanche release probabilities from empirical relationships involving terrain, long-term climatic characteristics, and forest cover, and simulating avalanche runout using numerical flow models (Issler, 2023).

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While automated hazard indication maps improve spatial coverage and objectivity, they still rely on discrete scenarios and simplified frequency assumptions. Early statistical approaches attempted to overcome these limitations by analysing avalanche occurrence and runout in a probabilistic framework. For example, Keylock et al. (1999) applied extreme value statistics and frequency–magnitude relationships to characterize avalanche size distributions and to estimate exceedance probabilities for different runout distances. Building on this line of research, Kleinn et al. (2024) reconsidered hazard mapping by moving away from the traditional use of return periods. Instead, probabilities are linked to each avalanche, depending on snow accumulation and exposition of the release zones, resulting in a wide range of possible avalanche release volumes. Return periods of intensity (flow height and pressure) in the runout region are derived from all simulated avalanches and their probabilities. By explicitly combining avalanche intensities with their associated probabilities, continuous intensity–frequency curves are obtained at any location, thereby replacing the discrete, scenario-based representation of hazard. Similarly, Oberndorfer et al. (2026) developed a probabilistic hazard mapping framework that transmits uncertainties in avalanche release volume through three-dimensional runout simulations to derive probability maps of impact and exceedance for exposed road sections. In addition, recent work by Rauter and Kowalski (2024) and by Aaron et al. (2022) has extended probabilistic mass-flow modelling by systematically propagating uncertainties within initial conditions and model parameters through ensemble-based, process-oriented simulations to derive spatially distributed runout and impact probabilities across complex terrain.

Today, operational avalanche safety decisions are still taken very differently in various regions. A basic approach is to measure the new snow accumulation and empirically derived thresholds for the height of new snow (Stoffel, 2018). This approach has reduced avalanche-related fatalities (Chabot and Kaba, 2016). Sheng et al. (2022) describes a more advanced observation-based approach for a daily prediction of the potential avalanche runout area. They derived fracture depths from documented avalanche events and statistically analysed weak-layer measurements to estimate typical fracture depth. From the recurrence of these fracture depth, they obtained probability distributions, which they combined with numerical simulations to predict avalanche runout.

An operational forecasting system, integrating meteorological station data into numerical avalanche dynamics simulations, is currently implemented in the Central Andes. Developed for a mining region, where avalanche activity threatens a critical access road, the system is highly site-specific and tailored to local topographic and climatic conditions (Vera Valero et al., 2016). It applies RAMMS::Extended to simulate wet snow avalanche runout distances, differentiating between cold and warm flow regimes based on the mean snow temperature in the release zone, while fracture depths are estimated from SNOWPACK simulations at adjacent weather stations (Bartelt and Lehning, 2002; Valero et al., 2015).

Advancing towards operational daily forecasting, Mariani et al. (2024) present an approach that integrates automated identification of potential release areas (PRAs) with numerical snowpack modelling. The system employs an automatic PRA-detection algorithm and combines its outputs with SNOWPACK simulations to assess snow cover stability. Based on this integration, potential avalanche runout lengths are determined for a range of typical avalanche problem types.

The described studies demonstrate that integrating daily observations with numerical simulation tools can effectively enhance operational avalanche mitigation processes. Previous work investigated the required model complexity and sensitivity needed to accurately capture daily variations in avalanche runout distances.

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Both, hazard mapping approaches and operational forecasting systems rely on numerical avalanche dynamic models to estimate potential runout distances. In hazard mapping, model input is typically derived from statistically evaluated snow heights based on long-term meteorological records, whereas operational applications increasingly use near-real-time measurements from meteorological stations. However, these observations are point measurements, often located in flat terrain, and cannot fully capture the spatial variability of snow conditions related to topographic parameters, such as elevation and aspect or terrain features causing variations in wind exposure within avalanche release areas (Bührle et al., 2023).

As a result, considerable uncertainty is inherently accepted in the specification of snow-related input parameters for avalanche simulations. Furthermore, numerical avalanche dynamics models introduce additional uncertainties related to model structure, parametrization, and simplifications of physical processes. To meaningfully interpret simulation results for decision-making, these sources of uncertainty need to be explicitly represented and carried on within the modelling framework.

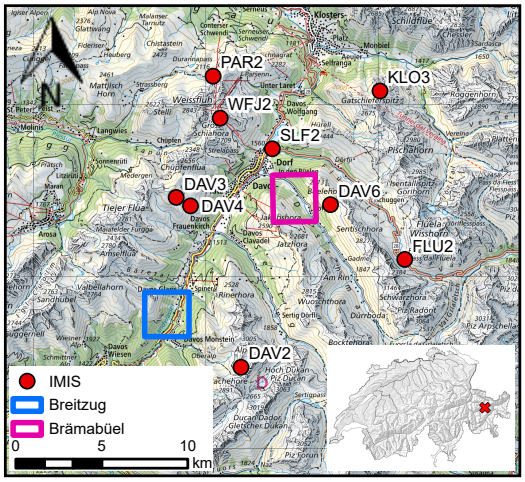
In this study, we develop an automated workflow that integrates weather station data, SNOWPACK simulations, avalanche dynamic simulation models, and visualization tools for cold powder avalanche conditions aiming at improving traffic safety applications in high-risk avalanche hazard areas. The weather station data is used to derive potential fracture depths, snowpack characteristics, and the estimated snow conditions within the avalanche path. The probability of release for each potential release area is determined based on weak-layer stability outputs from SNOWPACK. To address uncertainties in the input data and model results, we implement a probabilistic framework that generates daily hazard indication maps across multiple meteorological and snow cover scenarios.

2 Test Site and Data

The Dischma road in the Davos region of Switzerland is used as the main test case, with a specific focus on the Brämabüel section, attributable to the availability of long-term documentation of avalanche activity and road closures (see Fig. 3). The area is characterized by a dense network of meteorological measurement stations called Interkantonales Mess- und Informationssystem (IMIS) as shown in Fig. 1. Additionally, two new stations independent of the IMIS network, were installed with low-cost LiDAR sensors in November 2024, close to the release zone of one of the avalanche paths. These stations can measure the snow depth distribution on an hourly basis over an area of 14 500 m^2 (Ruttner et al., 2025). Along the road, avalanche risk is managed through a combination of avalanche control measures and temporary closures. At the Brämabüel section, active avalanche control with explosives from a helicopter platform is used, whereas on the south-facing slope no mitigation measures are implemented and risk management relies solely on road closures.

In Fig. 2 we show the mapped avalanches from the Davos avalanche database, occurring during the past 30 years at the Dischma road below the Brämabüel slope. There are four main avalanche paths marked as path 0, 1, 2 and 3. Avalanches originating from track 0 are excluded from the subsequent analysis because avalanche fences have been installed in this area in 1997.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-999
Preprint. Discussion started: 9 March 2026
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Station name	Station code	Elevation (m a.s.l.)	Distance (km)	Start year (yyyy)
SLF	SLF2	1563	3.0	1997
Weissfluhjoch	WFJ2	2536	5.6	1992
Bärentälli	DAV2	2558	9.9	1998
Hanengretji	DAV3	2455	5.6	1998
Frauentobel	DAV4	2330	4.8	2002
Lukschalp	DAV6	2290	3.4	2022
Gatschiefer	KLO3	2299	8.9	1996
Kreuzweg	PAR2	2290	8.0	1997
Flüelapass	FLU2	2394	8.4	2003

Figure 1. Overview of the IMIS station distribution in the Davos region and the test regions. The table shows the horizontal distances from the stations to the release zone at Brämabüel (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

Fig. 2a shows the number of observed avalanches reaching zones classified according to the total number of documented avalanches, while Fig. 2b displays the number of avalanches reaching the road measured from north to south of the road. It is clearly visible that most avalanches stop in the flatter runout zones (slope angle < 10 °). Only a small number of avalanches (less than 10) reach the road. In Fig. 2, avalanche path 3 is influenced by the avalanche path descending from the opposing slope.

For our analysis, we focus on two winter seasons where we have detailed documentation. We test our approach on four historical avalanche events, where – at the time – fewer measurement stations were active. The first event we focus on occurred on 15 January 2019 at Brämabüel, a north-east-facing slope in the Dischma Valley. After the New Year in 2019, a continuous snowfall period began. Within 36 h, an increase in snow height of 0.56 m was measured at the flat-field site of the Weissfluhjoch (WFJ) station (see Fig. 5). Correspondingly, the avalanche danger level increased rapidly from Level 3 to Level 5. During avalanche control operations with helicopter three powder-snow avalanches were artificially triggered, with estimated release volumes between 5 000 and 10 000 m^3. All three avalanches reached the road even if they had rather small release volumes, primarily due to substantial snow entrainment along their paths (Glaus et al., 2025).

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-999
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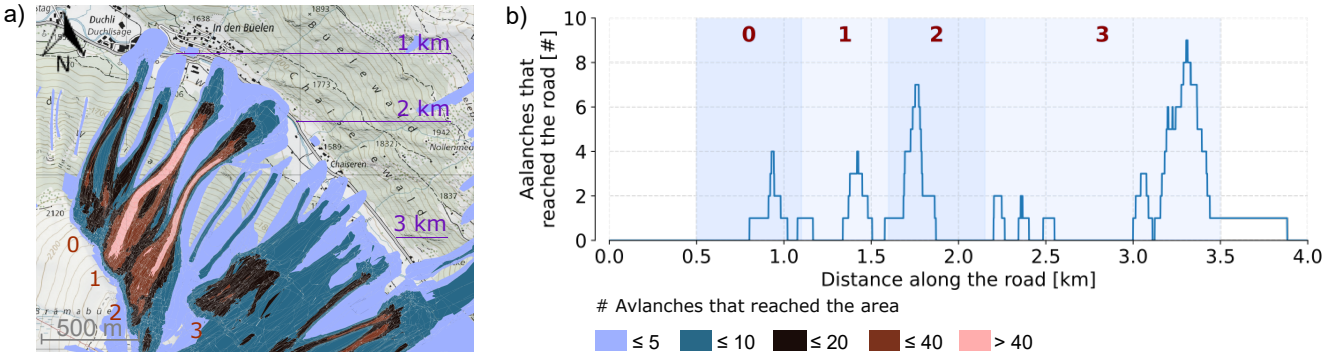


Figure 2. Overview of the mapped avalanche activity affecting the Dischma road near Brämabüel between 1999 and 2025. (a) number of observed avalanches reaching a pixel, (b) number of avalanches reaching the road (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

The second and third validation events occurred on 28 and 29 January 2025. The first of these avalanches was released by an Wyssen tower at Breitzug (east- to south-east-facing slope) at approximately 17:00 CET on the 28 January. This was the first avalanche release at Breitzug during the winter season and the avalanche reached the river. The third avalanche was artificially triggered at Brämabüel on 29 January 8:00 CET, approximately 9 km horizontal distance from Breitzug. There was little to no skiing activity on that slope prior to the release and no artificial avalanche releases in that season were performed, allowing the snowpack to develop largely under natural conditions. The avalanche remained relatively small and stopped well before reaching the base of the slope.

In order to assess the robustness of our algorithm, we compare recent data-rich events with older avalanches for which less information on weak-layers and fewer measurement stations are available. We consider avalanches from 1999 and 2018, where the road was hit, and from 2017 and 2021, where avalanches stopped shortly before reaching the road.

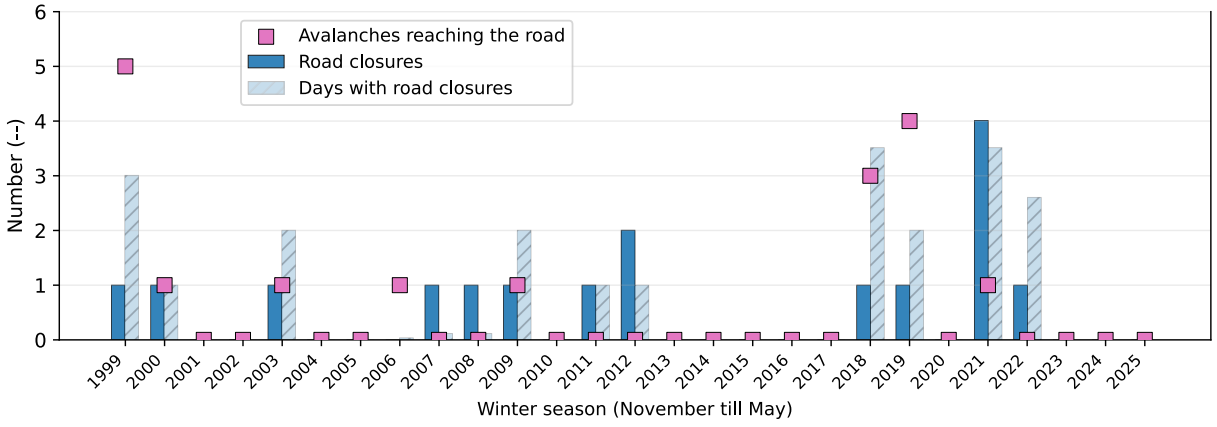


Figure 3. Overview of documented avalanche activity and road closures along the Dischma Valley over the last 26 winter seasons (1999 – 2025). The analysis is qualitative, as the documentation of avalanche events strongly depends on the availability and quality of the underlying database, which improved over time.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-999
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3 METHOD

The proposed framework aims to support daily avalanche runout predictions by coupling information on avalanche release conditions with avalanche dynamics. We only simulate dry slab avalanche releases. The occurrence of a slab avalanche requires sufficiently steep terrain, a weak-layer with a cohesive slab above, and a triggering mechanism. Snowpack stability is estimated using SNOWPACK, a physically based snow cover model (Bartelt and Lehning, 2002; Lehning et al., 2000; Lehning and Fierz, 2008), to constrain the likelihood, frequency, and characteristic size of potential releases. This release information is then used in combination with a numerical avalanche simulation tool to estimate runout distances.

Our operational workflow is shown in Fig. 4. The design of the workflow depends on the availability of input data and the local measurement infrastructure. In a first step, we present a configuration tailored to the Davos region as an example for a region where a large number of measurements are available. In a second step, we reduced the number of weather stations to show a more realistic picture of data availability for more data sparse regions.

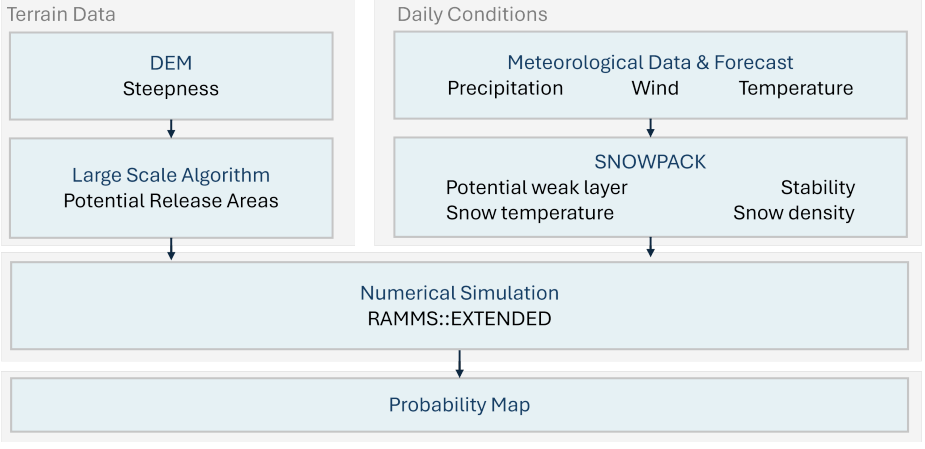


Figure 4. Conceptual presentation of the data flow to produce a probability map.

Terrain information is derived from a digital elevation model (DEM) with a spatial resolution of 5 m. Potential release areas corresponding to return periods of 10 and 30 years are derived using the automated algorithm proposed by Bühler et al. (2018) and are referred to as small and medium PRAs, respectively. The analysis focuses on assessing whether relatively small release volumes (5,000–25,000 m^3) are sufficient to reach the road or whether medium release volumes (25,000–60,000 m^3) are required (Bartelt and Christen, 2025). Larger release volumes are not considered, as such events are typically associated with very high avalanche danger levels under which road closures are implemented as a precautionary measure.

Snowpack conditions are derived from SNOWPACK simulations based on meteorological observations from the available IMIS stations. Two release scenarios are considered throughout the study: release of newly accumulated fresh snow and release on the most unstable buried weak-layer. Potential fracture depths are derived from flat-field weather stations and adjusted for

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elevation differences using a snow-depth gradient inferred from valley and mountain stations. A correction accounting for slope inclination is applied to the conversion of flat-field measurements to release-zone conditions following Glaus et al. (2025).

For the release scenario of new snow, fracture depth corresponds to the depth of snow accumulated during the most recent snowfall period, including settling of the snowpack, with the weak-layer defining the interface between the old and the new snow.

For the weak-layer release scenario, the most unstable weak-layer is identified using the method proposed by Mayer and Techel (2023). Snowpack stability is evaluated for a virtual slope with a reference slope angle of 38° and for the four main slope aspects. As e.g the Brämabüel release zone is oriented towards the northeast, weak-layer properties are estimated as the average of the north- and east-facing simulations.

The high temporal resolution measurements of the snow depth distribution in the Brämabüel release area reveals the substantial influence of snow redistribution by wind (Ruttner et al., 2025). Wind-induced snow redistribution is accounted for when wind speeds exceed a threshold of $7.5\,\mathrm{ms}^{-1}$ (Walter et al., 2020) and originate from directions that allow snow transport into the avalanche path. The amount of wind-drifted snow remains uncertain because existing approaches either neglect settling processes (Helbig et al., 2015) or operate at spatial resolutions which are too coarse to resolve local terrain effects (Quéno et al., 2024). We therefore apply additional snow depths of 0.25 m and 0.5 m to account for moderate and strong wind drifts respectively.

Avalanche propagation is simulated for all potential release areas and fracture depth scenarios using RAMMS::Extended. The model explicitly accounts for erosion and entrainment along the avalanche path and allows the simulation of multiple flow regimes (Zhuang et al., 2023). Because entrainment strongly influences avalanche mass and runout distance (Issler et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021; Ligneau et al., 2025), we limit erosion depth to the fracture depth associated with each release scenario, accounting for the erosion of the new snow or erosion of snow above the weak-layer.

Meteorological forecast data are used to estimate precipitation (new snow) and the evolution of air temperature prior to avalanche release. For both events, we used data from numerical weather prediction models run by MeteoSwiss, which were based on COSMO for the 2019 event (Baldauf et al., 2011) and on ICON for the 2025 event (Zängl et al., 2015), respectively. Both models have a spacial resolution of around 1 km for a forecast lead time of 24 h. We apply the predicted precipitation and air temperature to estimate cooling or warming of the snowpack. Based on the predicted temperature evolution (warming, cooling, constant), we include an additional colder or warmer simulation scenario to account for uncertainty in snowpack temperature.

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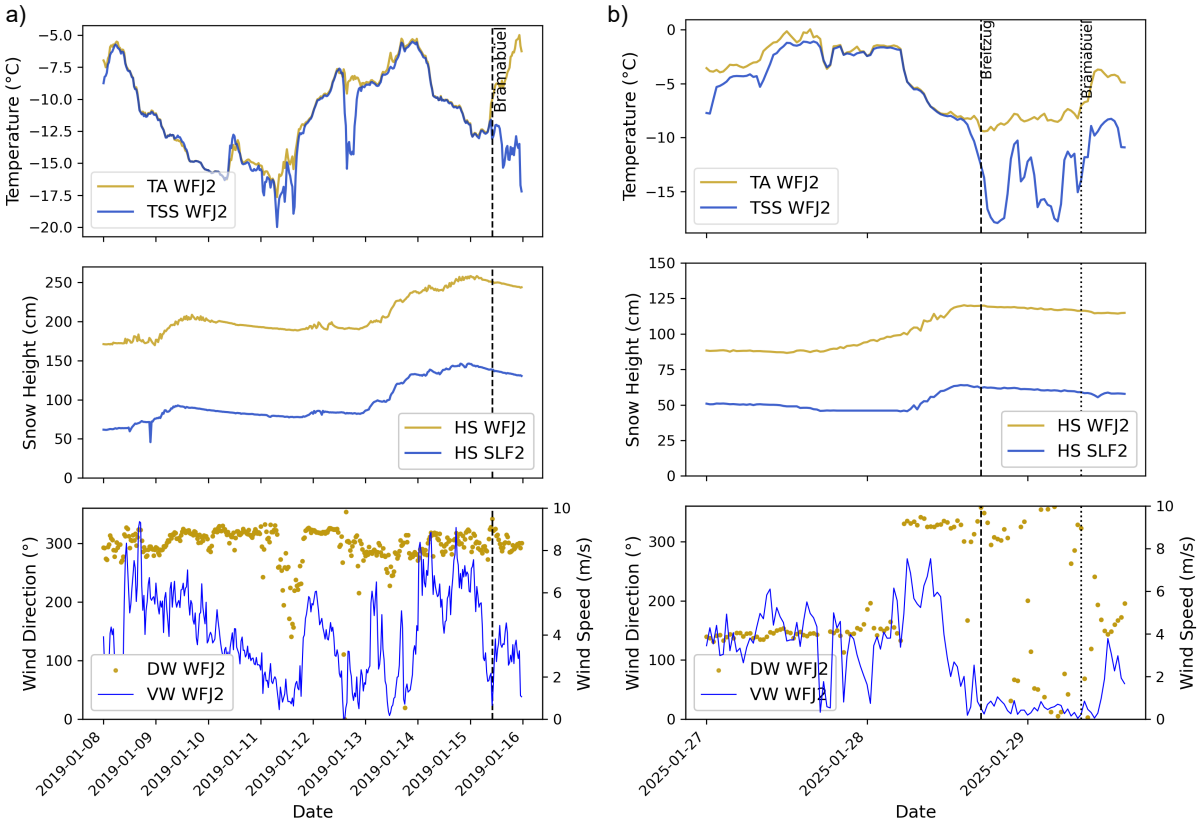


Figure 5. Time series of meteorological observations recorded at the Weissfluhjoch (WFJ2) and Davos valley (SLF2) IMIS stations during the snowfall events preceding the evaluated avalanche releases. Shown are air temperature (T_A), snow surface temperature (T_{SS}), total snow height (HS), wind direction (DW), and wind speed (VW). The timing of avalanche release is indicated by the black dotted vertical bar. Columns (a) and (b) correspond to the snowfall periods in 2019 and 2025, respectively. Data source: IMIS.

3.1 Release Probability

We present two approaches on how to calculate a probability indication map – the frequency approach and the stability approach. In both approaches, we assess the probability that a certain amount of snow loading occurs on a slope and interacts with a weak-layer which defines the fracture depth. The more refined stability approach further incorporates the stability of each single PRA.

For the subsequent avalanche simulations, an event is defined as the release of a single PRA at a given fracture depth derived as described above. Each simulated release volume is therefore characterized by one PRA and one fracture depth, with its thermal properties represented by the corresponding snow temperature class. All releases are assumed to occur naturally under the prescribed initial conditions.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-999
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Frequency Approach

In the frequency approach, we use input data from flat-field IMIS stations and weight all stations equally when deriving the predicted fracture depths. In this simplified implementation, all predicted fracture depths are assumed to occur with equal probability, independent of whether they originate from new snow or a buried weak layer.

The probability of fracture depth occurrence ($P_{\mathrm{FH,freq}}$), is estimated from the set of all predicted fracture depths obtained from all considered IMIS stations. We denote this set with $\mathcal{H} = \{h_1, h_2, \ldots, h_N\}$, where h are the fracture depths and N is the total number of events. The fracture depths are grouped into discrete bins b_k with a width of $0.1\,\mathrm{m}$ where k is the index of the bin according to the sensitivity analysis conducted by (Glaus et al., 2025). For each bin, the probability is defined as the relative frequency of observations within that bin:

$$P_{\mathrm{FH,freq}}(b_k) = \frac{n_k}{N}, \tag{1}$$

where n_k denotes the number of fracture depths falling into bin b_k. By design, the probabilities sum to one, yielding a normalized distribution in which fracture depth classes that occur more frequently are assigned higher probabilities.

For each fracture depth class b_k, avalanche simulations are performed to compute the corresponding runout. The simulation outputs are converted into binary hit indicators such that

$$I_k(x) = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if the avalanche reaches pixel } x, \\ 0, & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

The contribution of each fracture depth class to the spatial impact probability is then weighted by its occurrence probability $P_{\mathrm{FH,freq}}(b_k)$. The resulting hit probability at pixel x is obtained by summing the weighted contributions of all fracture depth classes,

$$P_{\mathrm{hit}}(x) = \sum_k P_{\mathrm{FH,freq}}(b_k)\, I_k(x), \tag{3}$$

yielding a spatially distributed probability of avalanche impact.

Stability Approach

The impact of an avalanche at a given pixel requires (i) the occurrence of a release with a given fracture depth and stability index, and (ii) sufficient avalanche propagation to reach the pixel. In the following, these two components are combined at the level of individual release areas to derive a spatially distributed hit probability for each pixel.

First, we calculate the set of fracture depths $\mathcal{H} = \{h_1, h_2, \ldots, h_N\}$ in the same way as in the frequency approach. To account for the stability of each PRA under the predicted snow load, we calculate the natural stability index S_n (Jamieson and Johnston, 2001), defined as the ratio between weak-layer shear strength τ_p and the applied shear stress of the slab. The natural stability index is given by

$$S_n = \frac{\tau_p}{\rho g D \sin(\alpha)}, \tag{4}$$

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where ρ is the slab density, g the gravitational acceleration, D the fracture depth (slope normal), and α the mean slope angle of the release area. The parameters τ_p, ρ, and D are obtained from SNOWPACK simulations, while α is derived from the terrain model.

To convert S_n into a release probability, an error function (ERF) is fitted (see A), assigning high release probability for $S_n < 1$, a transition zone around $S_n \approx 1.5$, and low release probability for $S_n \geq 2$ (Monti et al., 2014). For a release area i, the corresponding weight is given by

$$w_{k,i} = w_k^{\text{bin}} f(S_{n,i}), \tag{5}$$

where $f(S_{n,i})$ denotes the normalized stability-to-probability mapping constrained to a predefined interval.

For each fracture depth $h_j \in \mathcal{H}$, the stability-based release probability $p_j = f(S_{n,j})$ is first computed using the fitted error function. The fracture depths are then grouped into discrete bins b_k of width $0.1\,\text{m}$. For each bin, the corresponding bin-wise weight is obtained by summing the individual probabilities of all fracture depths falling within the bin normalized by the total number of fracture depths,

$$w_k^{\text{bin}} = \sum_{h_j \in b_k} \frac{1}{N} \cdot p_j. \tag{6}$$

For each release area i and fracture depth class b_k, simulation outputs are converted into binary hit indicators such that

$$I_i(x) = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if the avalanche reaches pixel } x, \\ 0, & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases} \tag{7}$$

If multiple simulations are available for the same (b_k, i) combination, a pixel is considered hit if at least one simulation reaches the pixel.

For a given fracture depth class b_k, the probability that at least one avalanche reaches pixel x is obtained by combining the weighted contributions of all contributing release areas. Assuming statistical independence between release areas, the hit probability for classes b_k with A being the total number of potential avalanches (individual simulated avalanches) is given by

$$P_{\text{hit}}(x) = 1 - \prod_{i=1}^{A} \left(1 - w_k^{\text{bin}} I_i(x)\right). \tag{8}$$

4 Results

Probability indication maps are calculated in a predictive mode based on the frequency approach for two detailed avalanche case studies from 2019 and 2025. The 2019 event is used to assess how well the predicted impact probabilities reproduce observed avalanche release areas and runout distances. In 2025, two avalanches were artificially triggered within a 24 h prediction period but on different slopes, showing different aspects and terrain characteristics. This allows for a targeted evaluation of whether the probability indication maps capture distinct avalanche responses under comparable meteorological conditions. The 2025

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-999
Preprint. Discussion started: 9 March 2026
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260 event at Breitzug is additionally recalculated based on the stability approach. To further evaluate the proposed framework, the analysis is extended to four additional historical avalanche events, with the primary aim of assessing whether the probability indication maps correctly indicate road impact in cases where SNOWPACK simulations were not available.

For the calculation of the probability indication maps, we performed one large-scale simulation for each predicted snow height at a station in the flat field. Each simulation represents a scenario in which all PRAs are triggered as independent 265 avalanches. Fig. 6 shows an example of the maximum core height across all scenarios and the maximum powder pressure for a flat-field snow height of 160 cm at $-8\,^{\circ}\mathrm{C}$ in the Brämabüel region, assuming 96 medium-sized release zones.

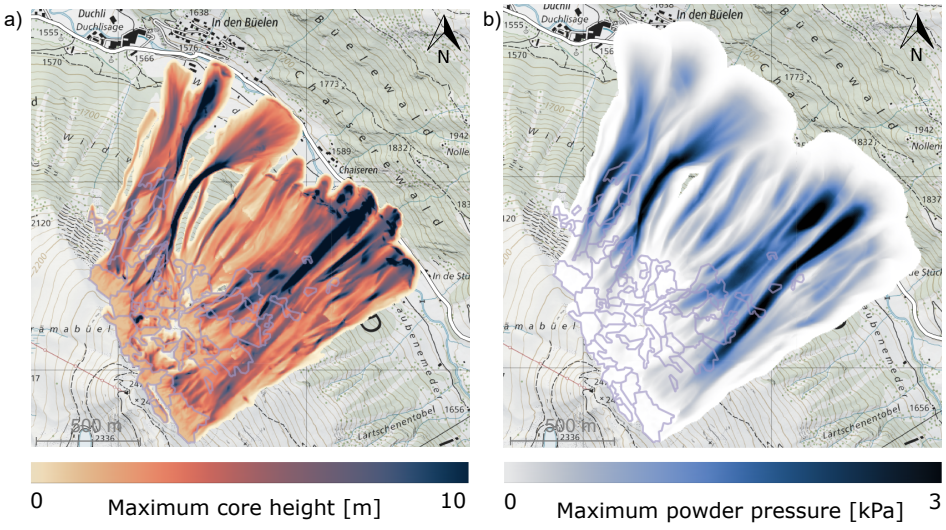


Figure 6. Example of the calculation results of the maximum core height and powder pressure for medium sized release zones with an expected new snow of 1.6 m in the flat field (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

4.1 Hindcast of the 2019 event

Figure 7 shows the calculated probability indication maps for the three avalanches that were released at the Brämabüel slope in 2019, considering small (on the left side) and medium sized release (right side) zones. The observed outline of the avalanche 270 core and the release zone are shown in black. All three avalanches reached the road, and the associated powder clouds extended into the counter slope. The powder cloud impact appears spatially limited, as grid cells with cloud pressures below 0.5 kPa are omitted because such pressures are insufficient to harm a person. Furthermore, the terrain in the runout zones is relatively flat, leading to rapid deceleration of both the core and the cloud.

The lower panels of Fig. 7 present the corresponding hit probabilities along the road, plotted from north to south over a 275 distance of 0 to 4 km. For small release zones, path 2 and 3 show a low probability of reaching the road, with maximum values of approximately 20 %. In contrast, the medium release zone scenario indicates a substantially higher likelihood of hitting the road for all three tracks, with probabilities reaching up to 80 % for track 3. Overall, the spatial patterns of the higher probability

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values align well with the observed avalanche paths, indicating that the model captures both the road section and relative extent of the avalanche runout.

The probability indication maps are based on measurements from all seven IMIS stations. To assess the sensitivity of the results to lower station availability, the road-aligned probability profiles were recomputed by successively removing stations according to their distance from the release area (Fig. 1). The resulting profiles show limited spread, indicating a low sensitivity to the number of applied input stations.

To quantify the sensitivity of the probability along the road to the number of input stations, deviations from the reference case (seven stations) were evaluated using the mean absolute error (MAE), and the maximum pointwise deviation. For six and five stations, the deviations remain very small, with MAE values below 10^{-3}. When reducing the number of stations to four and three, errors increase but remain moderate.

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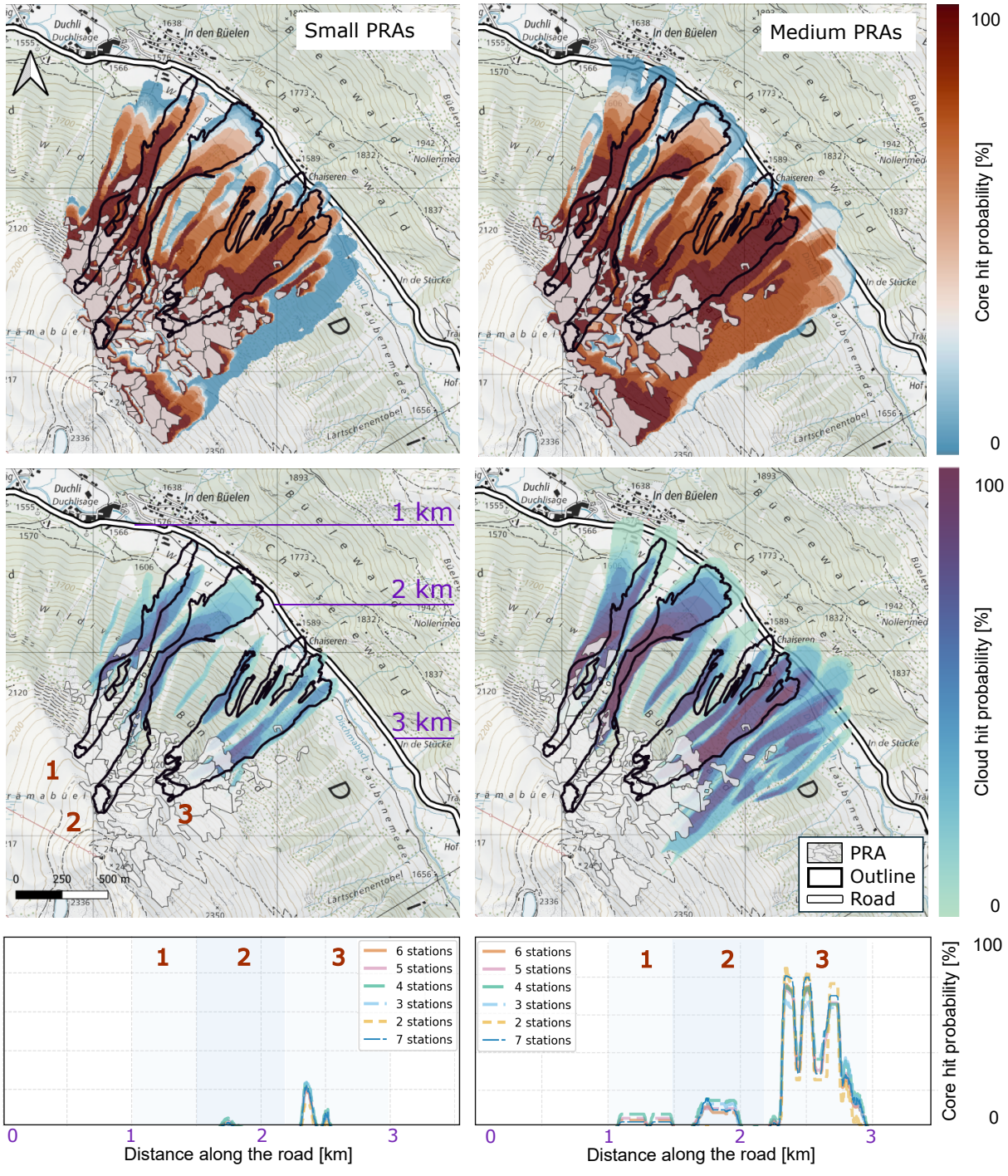


Figure 7. Resulting probability indication maps based on the frequency approach for small (left) and medium (right) release zones based on snow measurements from selected IMIS stations in the Davos region and weather forecasts one day before the event (14 January 2019, 12:00 CET). Black outlines indicate the avalanche event of 15 January 2019. The bottom row shows the calculated hit intensities along the road based on seven IMIS stations, with stations successively removed starting from the farthest one (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

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4.2 Hindcast of the 2025 events

For the 2025 case study, probability indication maps were issued on 28 January 2025 at 12:00 CET after a short snowfall, as shown in Fig. 5. Within the following 24 h prediction period, two avalanches were artificially triggered at different times and on slopes with differing aspects and terrain characteristics. These events provide the opportunity to examine how the framework produces the probability indication maps to contrasting avalanche outcomes under otherwise comparable meteorological conditions.

The first avalanche was triggered at the Breitzug slope at approximately 17:00 CET on the same day and reached the river. The road section next to the river is protected by an avalanche shed. The corresponding probability indication map is shown in Fig. 8. The second avalanche was triggered at Brämabüel the following morning at around 07:00 CET, and remained rather small, as shown in Fig. 9. Although both cases are based on the same forecast cycle, the resulting probability indication maps differ due to variations in the predicted weak-layer characteristics, which are associated with different slope exposures.

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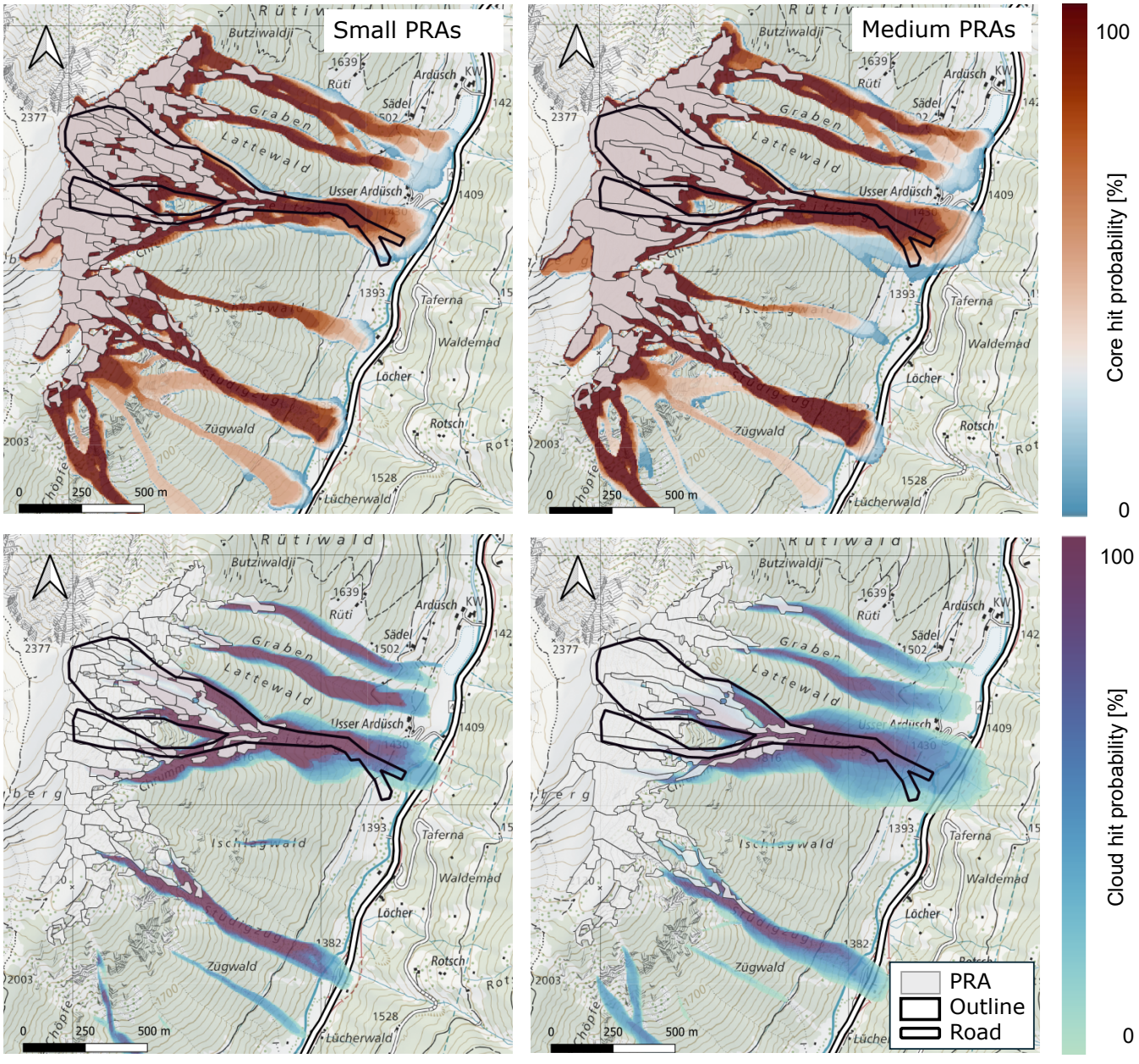


Figure 8. Resulting probability indication map based on the frequency approach issued on 28 January 2025 at 12:00 CET. The avalanche outlines (shown in black) correspond to the event triggered at approximately 17:00 CET on the same day by a Wyssen tower at the Breitzug slope (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

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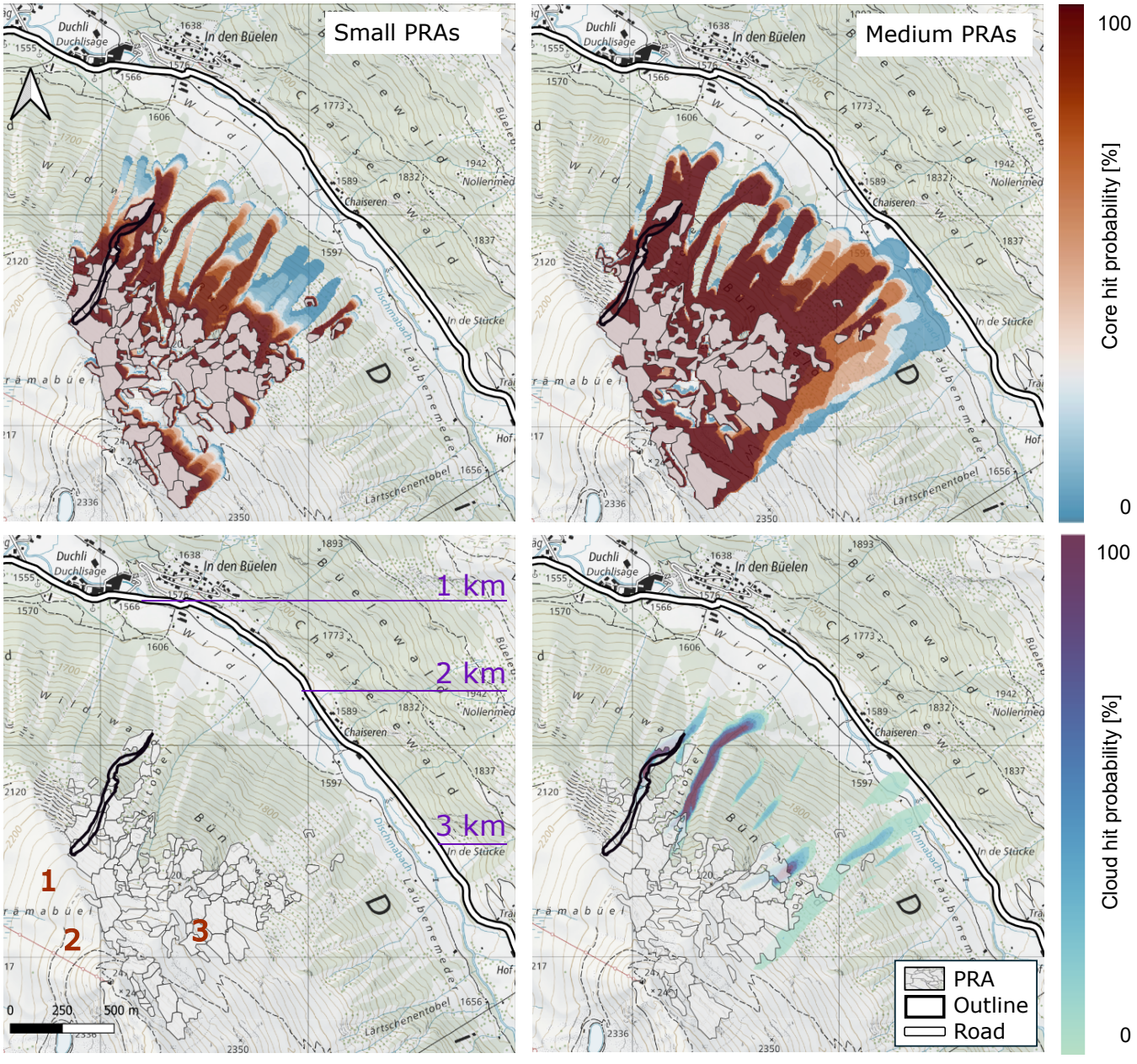


Figure 9. Resulting probability indication map calculated based on snow measurements at all IMIS stations in the region of Davos and the weather forecast of the day before the event on 28 January 2025 12:00 CET. In black the avalanche outlines are marked for the event that happened in the morning of 29 January 2025 8:00 CET. The avalanche paths 1, 2 and 3 are marked in the lower left figure (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

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In a next step, we conducted the same analysis for the Breitzug event as an example with the stability approach. In Fig. 10 we present the resulting map. Overall, the runout and predicted probability at the road did not change considerably. But it is visible that the influence of the PRA's, which come from a steeper slope, have a stronger influence on the result.

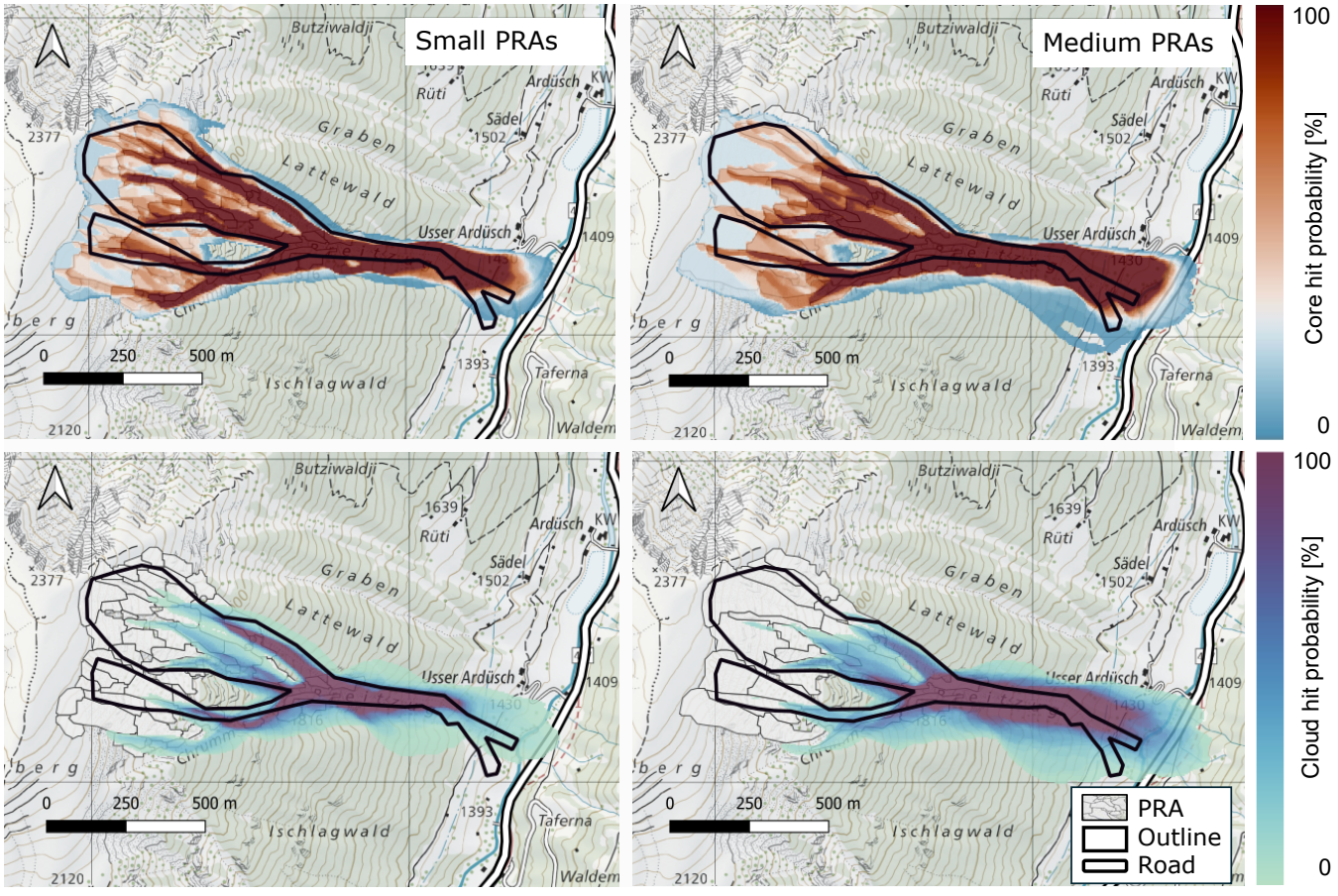


Figure 10. Resulting probability indication map for one channel at Breitzug based on the stability approach including the stability index and steepness of every single release zone. The PRAs are shown in the background to improve the visibility of the probability indication map in the upper part of the avalanche path (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

4.3 Application to historical avalanche events

In addition to the recent case studies, the proposed data flow was applied to a set of historical avalanche events for which only limited input data were available. For these events, not all elements of the workflow could be reconstructed. Most notably, detailed SNOWPACK simulations, which are required for a robust identification of the governing weak-layers, are not possible to be reproduced. Probability indication maps were therefore computed using IMIS stations that were operational at the respective times and, where possible, supplemented by information from manual snow-pit observations.

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The analysed historical cases include the extreme winter of 1999 and an event from 2018. During the winter of 1999, avalanches from paths 1, 2, and 3 reached the road, whereas in 2018 only avalanche path 1 and 2 reached similar distances. To further test the robustness of the proposed data flow, two additional events from 2017 and 2021 were included, in which avalanches stopped within the flatter runout zone and did not reach the road (Fig. 11). The 2017 event occurred in relatively warm conditions and developed into a wet-snow avalanche, whereas the 2021 event was characterised by cold snow conditions, with average snow temperatures of approximately $-8\,^{\circ}\mathrm{C}$ in the uppermost metre.

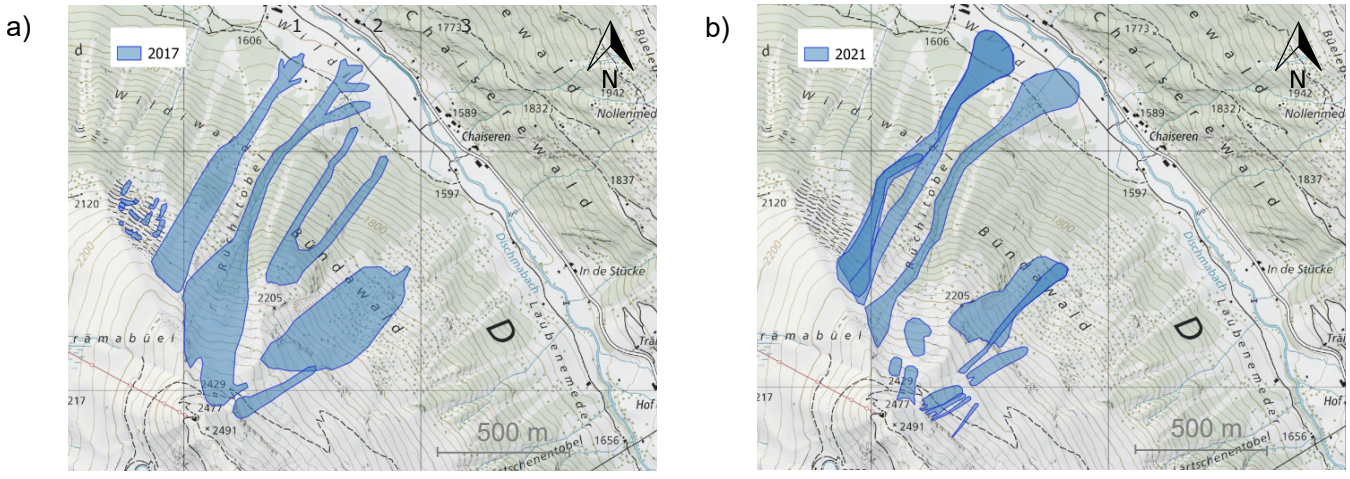


Figure 11. Manually delineated avalanche outlines for the events of 10 March 2017 (a) and 15 January 2021 (b). For both events, avalanche paths 1 and 2 propagated further downslope than avalanche path 3. For both events additional avalanche activity is visible within the study area (map source: Federal Office of Topography).

Avalanche probabilities along the road for small and medium release zones are shown in Fig. 12. Even for the extreme 1999 event, our calculations indicate that avalanches initiated in small release zones do not reach the road for track 1. The flow behaviour of that specific event is most likely related to potentially erratic information on the actual weak-layer involved and the associated erosion volume. For medium-sized release zones, and primarily for track 3, we obtained a higher probability of hits along the road. These findings emphasize the importance of accounting for all potential buried weak-layers in the snowpack to capture the full erosion potential, as opposed to only considering new precipitation amounts.

For the 2021 case, we obtained a road hit probability of around 18 % for track 3 and the simulated runout distance is slightly overestimated compared to the observed runout. Overall, the results indicate a systematic tendency for avalanche path 3 to propagate too far in the simulations, whereas avalanche paths 1 and 2 tend to be too short. These differences are likely related to topographic characteristics for which we are unable to model a realistic avalanche flow behaviour response. Avalanche paths 1 and 2 are more channelised and originate from steeper release zones, whereas avalanche path 3 is less confined and features substantial small-scale vegetation within the track. Such vegetation is not explicitly represented in the simulation tool, but in reality it is likely to increase the basal friction, which limits runout distances. Consistent with this interpretation, avalanche path 3 is observed less frequently to propagate fully down to the road in documented events as shown in Fig. 2.

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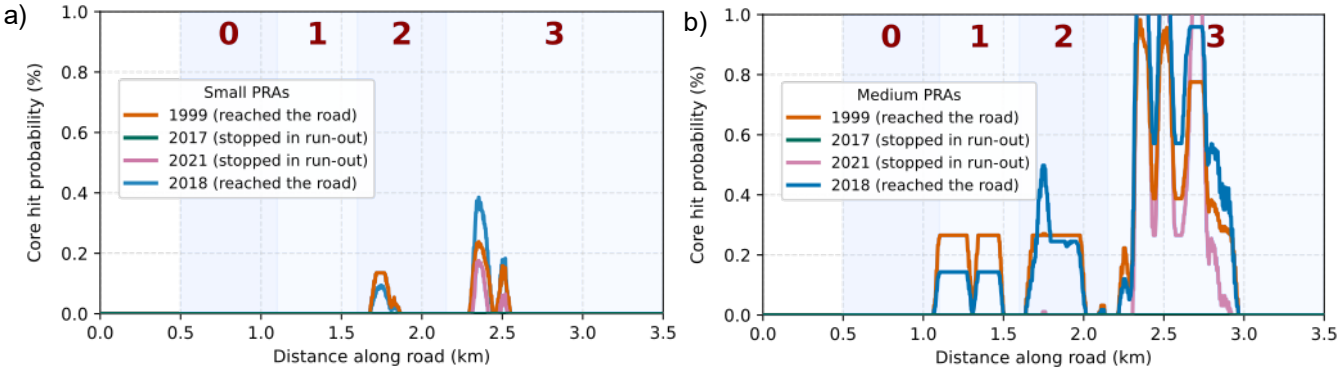


Figure 12. Probability along the road for small and medium release zones for the events in 1999, 2017, 2018 and 2021. For the events in 1999 and 2018, avalanche paths 1 and 2 reached the road, whereas in 2017 and 2021 the avalanches stopped within the flatter runout zone.

5 Discussion

Following the implementation of our framework on both recent and historical avalanche events, this section evaluates its ability to predicting runout distances from daily snow and weather conditions. The discussion subsequently examines the sensitivity of the results to input data and the robustness of the probability calculations.

The Brämabüel slope offers a useful case for comparing the avalanche conditions and consequences in 2019 and 2025. In 2019, the Dischma road was closed for more than 2 days and the avalanches reached the road, while in 2025 the road was only briefly closed during artificial release, and the avalanche stopped partway down the slope. The contrasting outcomes align with the probability indication maps where some avalanche scenarios are expected to stop partway down the slope while others are likely to produce much longer runouts (see Fig. 7 and 9).

We acknowledge the simplification inherent in the frequency approach, in which storm snow and old snow (weak-layer) releases are weighted equally. In practical applications where limited information on weak-layers is available—for example, when only a single snowpit provides indications of weak-layer properties—this weighting could be adjusted based on expert judgement. Alternatively, the stability of the weak-layer could be parametrized based on the shear strength as a function of fracture depth, following the formulation proposed by Bažant et al. (2003) and further refined by Gaume et al. (2014); Meloche et al. (2024). This would allow the stability index to be estimated in a manner more aligned with the stability approach.

The availability and quality of the input data can have a strong influence on the resulting probability indication maps. The maps are based on forecasted snow and weather conditions and therefore inherit uncertainties from meteorological predictions. Deviations between forecasted and actual conditions, or rapid changes in the snowpack due to snowfall, wind redistribution, or temperature changes, can substantially reduce the representativeness of the maps. Consequently, probability indication maps should be regarded as time-dependent products that are only valid for the specific forecast window for which they are generated.

The spatial representativeness of snow and weather measurement stations strongly influences the model performance. Although a dense station network is available, most stations are located in flat terrain and may not adequately represent the

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Preprint. Discussion started: 9 March 2026
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prevailing conditions in steep avalanche release zones (Helbig et al., 2015; Helbig and van Herwijnen, 2017). Our analysis shows that simply increasing the number of measurement stations does not improve predictive skill; instead, the model performance improves when meteorological measurements at a station location are well correlated with the conditions within a specific avalanche path. In this respect, the DAV2 station, which is located in steeper terrain, shows a notably stronger correspondence with the Brämabüel avalanche slope. Snow temperature measurements are particularly sensitive to sensor placement and radiative effects, which impacts the transferability of the data to release areas and introduces additional uncertainty. Still, if we compare the predicted fracture depth with the snow depth distribution measurements from photogrammetric drone data for the Brämabüel cases 2019 and 2025, we had a high probability around the measured snow height.

The results of our framework implementation further reveal a strong sensitivity to several model input parameters. In particular, the definition and spatial extent of the release zones exert a major influence on the resulting probability indication maps. In the current implementation, release zones are derived using a return-period-based algorithm. While suitable for large-scale assessments, such static delineations are suboptimal for operational forecasting. Release zones should instead be dynamically adapted to prevailing snow and weather conditions (Meloche et al., 2025).

Moreover, the avalanche dynamics simulations are highly sensitive to the assumed snow temperature, a parameter that is difficult to infer reliably from valley-based observations. This sensitivity constitutes a key source of uncertainty in operational applications, where direct measurements in avalanche release areas are rarely available.

Accurate representation of forest cover and vegetation is also important to achieve realistic avalanche extents, as these strongly influence avalanche flow behaviour. In the Brämabüel simulations, forest density was underestimated compared to the actual conditions, which allowed simulated avalanches to propagate into areas that are classified as non-affected in the official hazard map.

Finally, interpretation of modelled results requires consideration of the avalanche history of individual tracks. The Breitzug case, for instance, represents the first avalanche of the season and occurred on an undisturbed snowpack within a well-defined terrain bowl–conditions conducive to large avalanches. In contrast, the frequently skied Brämabüel slope experiences snowpack compaction from ski traffic, which disrupts weak-layer continuity and reduces the likelihood of large releases. These local effects are not explicitly represented in the current modelling framework, but strongly influence real-world avalanche behaviour.

We tested two approaches of avalanche release probabilities; first, assuming that all release zones have the same stability index, and second, considering a stability index depending on SNOWPACK calculations. Overall, we get similar probability indication maps from these two approaches, but the map generated from the simpler stability index shows a more differentiated picture of the runout distances. While this could serve as helpful information for safety-related decisions, it also entails greater uncertainties in the input parameters, making the results harder to interpret. With evolving research on the prediction of snowpack stability and size of release zones, additional statistical models could be coupled to our dataflow (Gaume et al., 2012).

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6 CONCLUSION

This study presents a proof of concept for a model-driven framework that combines meteorological measurements, weather forecasts, snowpack simulations, and dynamic avalanche simulations to generate spatially explicit probability indication maps of avalanche runout. These maps are intended to support decision-making concerning traffic safety management and daily avalanche mitigation strategies in high risk avalanche hazard areas.

The results demonstrate that the framework can reliably distinguish between events in which avalanches reach the road and events in which they stop higher up on the slope. The analysis highlights the importance of the spatial relationship between weather stations and individual avalanche paths, as well as the potential for substantial uncertainties to propagate through our framework, from local measurements to dynamic avalanche simulations.

In this first implementation, snowpack stability was not explicitly included in the probability calculation. While integrating stability information from snowpack models or observations is a promising next step, caution is warranted, as additional modelling layers may further increase overall uncertainty and calibration traceability.

For practical implementation, such a framework would need to be evaluated and refined over several seasons in close interaction with practitioners, in order to characterize systematic model deficiencies, including potential over- or underestimation of runout distances, and to isolate the sources of error. In this context, data-driven and machine-learning approaches may offer additional opportunities to support pattern recognition and uncertainty assessment, provided that sufficient high-quality training data is available. We see considerable potential for this approach in regions where a single decision-maker must assess avalanche hazard over large areas within a short time frame, as the framework can provide a rapid overview of potential avalanche hot spots and it can highlight tracks that may not have been active in recent years. In the future we wish to further develop and test this approach in data sparse regions like Alaska or the Himalayas.

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Code availability. The post-processing code for the input data and the calculation of the probability indication maps, applied after the simulations are completed, will be made publicly available on GitHub upon publication.

Author contributions. JG, KWJ, JGau, and YB designed the study. JG performed the calculations and drafted the manuscript. JK and LS contributed to the data analysis and probability calculations. PR provided field measurements from the Brämabüel avalanche paths. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the results and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Appendix A: Error Function Mapping of the Stability Index

The natural stability index S_n is converted into a release probability using an error function (ERF), which provides a smooth transition between unstable and stable conditions. The mapping is defined as

$$P_{\mathrm{rel}}(S_n) = \frac{1}{2}\left[1 - \mathrm{erf}\left(\frac{S_n - S_{50}}{\sigma_S\sqrt{2}}\right)\right], \tag{A1}$$

where S_{50} denotes the stability index corresponding to a release probability of 0.5 and σ_S controls the width of the transition zone. In this study, we use $S_{50} = 1.5$ and $\sigma_S = 0.25$, resulting in a pronounced transition between unstable and stable conditions and a rapid decrease in release probability for $S_n > 2$.

Figure A1 illustrates the resulting relationship between S_n and P_{rel}.

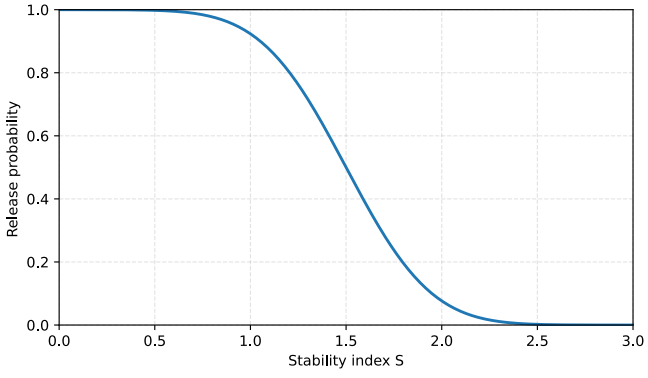


Figure A1. Mapping between the natural stability index S_n and the release probability using the ERF function.

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