

# Winter Weather Terminology Guideline

## UNITED STATES WARNINGS, WATCH S AND AVALANCHE DESCRIPTIONS

**Avalanche Descriptions:** In the U.S. avalanches are rated by five color descriptors, with Green being the lowest hazard and Black being the most extreme hazard. (add URL to DRI Avalanche Safety attachment 1). (Note: Internationally, there are also five categories of avalanches, but not all the color descriptors are the same. If field work takes you to an international back county site, be sure you have familiarized yourself with the international descriptions.)

**Blizzard warning:** Sustained winds or frequent gusts of 35 mph in combination with falling and/or blowing snow, generally expected to last for a period of at least three hours. Visibility will be limited to a quarter mile and temperatures will often remain extremely cold

**Heavy snow warning:** Snow accumulations are expected to approach or exceed six inches in 12 hours, but significant wind is not expected. A heavy snow warning may also be issued if eight inches or more of snow is expected to accumulate in a 24 hour period.

**Ice storm warning:** A significant coating of ice, one-quarter inch or more, is expected.

**Wind chill <sup>1</sup>warning:** Life-threatening wind chills reach minus 50 or lower.

**Winter storm watch:** A significant winter storm may affect the area, but its occurrence, location and timing are still uncertain. A winter storm watch is issued to provide 12 to 36 hours notice of the possibility of severe winter weather.

**Winter storm warning:** Issued when hazardous winter weather is occurring, imminent or likely. A warning is used for winter weather conditions posing a threat to life and property.

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<sup>1</sup> Wind chill is an estimation of how cold it feels when the effects of temperature and wind speed are combined. For example, at 30°F a 10 mph wind combined will have the same chilling effect on the body as a temperature of 21°F in a calm atmosphere. The Weather Service issues this information as the wind chill index. For more information, see OSHA's Cold Stress Card, [http://www.dri.edu/images/stories/editors/ehs/ehsdocs/Gen\\_Safety\\_Cold\\_Stress\\_OSHA\\_1998.pdf](http://www.dri.edu/images/stories/editors/ehs/ehsdocs/Gen_Safety_Cold_Stress_OSHA_1998.pdf)