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Snowbird, UDOT take avalanche control to next level

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SALT LAKE CITY — When snow covers Little Cottonwood Canyon Road, UDOT avalanche crews work around the clock to protect motorists and Snowbird Village from deadly slides.

"We try and lead our field in avalanche control," said Peter Schory, Snowbird winter operations director. So, Snowbird bought a French-made **O'BellX** exploder for UDOT avalanche forecasters to deploy. It's only the third in North America.

The **O'BellX** exploder mixes hydrogen and oxygen to trigger an avalanche under the pod. "The gases mix, and there's an explosion which forces an explosion which comes out the bottom," said Schory.

After a helicopter drops it off, the exploder will sit on top of a tower high on Mount Superior across the road from Snowbird Village. One person triggers the charge from a computer.

If UDOT did not regularly blast that area, UDOT's avalanche supervisor for Little Cottonwood Canyon said a large slide could hit the Lodge at Snowbird. "It's a very active path. We're going to shoot that every time, and it's got a lot of vertical before it comes down on the road," said Matt McKee, UDOT avalanche supervisor.

This system makes the job easier to do regularly, and makes forecasters more confident about safeguarding the road. "This gets me feeling a little bit better about it. If we had 20 more of these, I'd feel a whole lot better," said McKee.

UDOT will use it along with artillery and nine **Gazex** tubes that have triggered avalanches for years. But the exploder does not need gas lines running up the mountain, or potentially dangerous gun shells. "We are really confident we'll get a better blast than we used to with the artillery," said McKee.

"This technology will be used, in my opinion, in many ski resorts in the United States and Canada," said Schory.

The other two are used by the Wyoming Department of Transportation near Jackson. They cost around \$200,000, including installation. The avalanche supervisor said they will work on getting the funding so they can have more of them throughout the canyon.