

Law would make ski helmets mandatory

By Kathryn Reed

With the steady increase in helmet use by skiers and boarders, it's hard to know if making usage mandatory is necessary. But that is exactly what one California lawmaker wants to do.

State Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, introduced legislation Thursday to require anyone on the slopes younger than 18 to wear a helmet. This would be similar to the bicycle helmet law that took affect in California several years ago.

"Helmets are designed to reduce the severity of head injuries, but they are most effective at providing protection from a direct blow to the head at speeds of 12mph or slower," according to the National Ski Areas Association.

While this national group advocates helmet use, studies have proved that in most fatalities on ski slopes that a helmet would not have saved that person's life based on the severity of the impact.

Actress Natasha Richardson died of a head injury following a fall during a lesson at Quebec's Mont Tremblant ski resort last year. She was not wearing a helmet. Helmets weren't being discussed when Sonny Bono died at Heavenly Mountain Resort in 1998 after running into a tree.

Athletes making a living on the slopes now all seem to wear a helmet. One-time Olympic hopeful snowboarder Kevin Pearce was reported on Thursday to be in serious condition with a severe brain injury at University Hospital in Utah from a fall last month.

In the United States, 48 percent of skiers and riders wear a

helmet and 77 percent of kids 9 and younger do, while 66 percent of those ages 10-14 do, according to the NSAA.

The organization's research shows that as one's ability increases, the likelihood of that person wearing a helmet goes up.

"California's ski slopes are perhaps the last area of recreation where we do not have basic safety standards in place for children," Yee, who is a child psychologist, said in a press release. "Despite repeated warnings from public health experts, professional athletes, and ski resorts, each winter brings news of hundreds of unnecessary tragedies for the failure to wear a helmet. With this legislation, we can significantly reduce instances of traumatic brain injury or death for such a vulnerable population."

The Canadian Standards Association recommends alpine skiers and snowboarders wear helmets because they can reduce the risk of head injury by 60 percent. Ten months ago the agency approved standards for helmets. Now it's up to manufacturers to meet those specs.

In October, Vancouver-based Intrawest and home to next month's Olympics, issued a statement encouraging skiers and snowboarders wear helmets at its North American resorts. The headgear is mandatory for kids in its learn to ski programs. Next season helmets will also be mandatory in the company's freestyle terrain parks.

This is the first season all Vail Resorts (which owns Heavenly) must wear helmets while on the job.