

Wicked weather creates slushy mess throughout Lake Tahoe

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Six inches of fluffy snow fell overnight in South Lake Tahoe and it hasn't stopped.

"Most of the roads in the county, both up there at the lake and down here in the valley, have ice on them. So far this morning we have had eight multi-vehicle traffic accidents – luckily none with serious injury – and numerous vehicles that have slid off the roadway," Jim Halsey with the Douglas County sheriff's department said.

By Susan Wood and Kathryn Reed

If this is what fall in Lake Tahoe is like, who knows what winter will bring when it starts tomorrow.

The La Nina tropical weather phenomenon is shaping up to be a doozy for the West Coast. With more than half the United States weather map covered with snow, the Weather Channel reports the Sierra Nevada beating a 30-year record with 300 inches of snow accumulating from November through December.

This latest storm series declared an "atmospheric river" of blustery weather is predicted to bring up to 15 feet of snow in some spots of the mountain range running up and down the spine of California. As a gauge, a basketball hoop sits at 10 feet.



Slushy roads were the norm throughout Lake Tahoe during the weekend.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

But it's the high winds with heavy rain that captured the headlines this weekend.

The National Weather Service in Reno reported a 155mph gust at Alpine Meadows Ski Resort on Sunday. A 67mph gust was reported at Lake Tahoe Airport in South Lake Tahoe.

Take that with the Weather Service reports of at least 3 inches of rain at the lake in a three-day period, and emergency crews have the makings of a major weather event including flooding, downed trees and power lines. The Lake Tahoe region remains in a winter storm warning period until 4pm today.

Downed power lines west of Sierra-at-Tahoe closed Highway 50 near Tamarack Pines Sunday afternoon. In the morning the South Shore ski resort was evacuating skiers and riders after a tree landed on a chairlift cable. This highway incident came hours after snow slid off the cliff onto the eastbound lanes of 50 on the east side of Echo Summit, California Highway Patrol reported.

"Luckily, and I knock on wood, there have been no injury

accidents,” CHP Sgt. Terry Lowther reported Sunday afternoon. “But if this rain and slush freezes tonight, it will all be ice.”

Temperatures were supposed to plummet to a low of 22 degrees overnight, making for slick, dangerous conditions for late-travel and this morning’s commute.

For people coming to the mountains, it was an interesting drive with restrictions on most of the roads in and out of the basin. That is likely to be the scenario for the better part of the week as storms keep rolling in. Be sure to check the state icons on the home page of *Lake Tahoe News* to know the road conditions.

South Lake Tahoe police Sgt. Josh Adler said officers are finding people driving way too fast for the conditions. Officers were contending with tons of spinouts and accidents throughout the weekend. No injury accidents were reported through Sunday afternoon.

“One guy said he skidded for 100 feet. I told him you are driving too fast,” Adler said of the motorist who hit the backend of a BlueGo bus.

Douglas County sheriff’s dispatch said nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

Lake Valley Fire was hopping Sunday afternoon with engines at incidents of two downed trees – one at North Upper Truckee that closed the road at Shoshone and another plunging into a home at the 1300 block of Glen Eagles, north of Pioneer Trail.

“When you have the high winds with the ground saturated, we’re going to have some trees come down,” fire Battalion Chief Gareth Harris said.

Sierra Pacific Power was busy Sunday as well. One minor outage was reported at the Skyland area, with another 30 households

in the Glenbrook area without power for several hours Sunday. The 80 customers in the North Upper Truckee by Meyers were to have lights back on Sunday night.

In Tahoe City, 500 customers were in the dark, while 1,000 in Incline Village lost power. Those areas are not expected to have power until this morning.

"We heard the crash and we knew that was not a pine cone hitting the roof. And then the power went out," Tracy Owen Chapman said of the tree in the middle of the street in the Skyland area.

One person on the street could not get out because the live wires were directly in front of their house. No injuries occurred, and the tree did not hit a house or a vehicle.

The Reno-Tahoe International Airport experienced delays with the first storm in the series Friday, but reported no affects on Sunday afternoon, airport authority spokeswoman Heidi Berthold noted.

Flooding was a problem on Highway 89 for one Caltrans crew dealing with a pond about a block west of 15th Street in the westbound lane. Those men reported up to a foot of runoff water at the road there.

John Greenhut, director of Public Works for South Lake Tahoe, said minor flooding in low lying areas started on Sunday, but nothing serious.

"... we are equipped for either snow or rain. We don't like to have an excess of either," Greenhut said.

With this being the fourth winter after the devastating Angora Fire, Greenhut said everything in that area is stabilized, but his crews still have an eye on the area.

It has been slush on the roads and in driveways. People don't know if they should be shoveling or using a broom to clear the

muck.

“At 6,600 (feet) I cleaned up about a foot of heavy, wet snow this morning. It is back to rain again at about 34 degrees. We are praying for the temps to drop again so that the storm continues on a cold note,” Chris Nelson of Tahoe Donner said late Sunday morning.

Kaycee Odom of Charlotte, N.C., was awed by seeing snowplows for the first time. She and her friend came to ski, but the weather has not cooperated. Instead, they found their way to the Beacon restaurant for food and drinks on Sunday.

All this weather has been a mixed blessing for people who play in the snow. While the ski resorts are rejoicing about the amount of snow dumping on them, the wind is making the freshies inaccessible.

Most resorts around Lake Tahoe closed early Sunday because wind made operating the lifts hazardous. Sierra-at-Tahoe had the most notable news Dec. 19 when a treetop fell onto the West Bowl lift. Five people sustained minor injuries that did not require hospitalization.

Heavenly closed early except for the Boulder area. Mount Rose and Squaw closed.

“La Nina continues to deliver massive storms to the region – after opening on 100-plus inches of snow, we are now over 200 inches for the season and it’s still just December. This storm, while a bit heavier than the Thanksgiving storm, is helping build our base depths and fill in all the nooks and crannies in the trees. Once the temps drop and the snow gets lighter, we’ll be looking forward to some big powder days,” said Kirstin Cattell, spokeswoman at Sierra-at-Tahoe.

Backcountry enthusiasts will want to keep a close eye on reports from the Sierra Avalanche Center because the conditions have been precarious.

Hotels around the basin have rooms to rent because people are choosing to not come right now.

Jerry Bindel, who runs Lakeland Village in South Lake Tahoe, said his property's rule is reservations can be pushed back if people don't feel comfortable coming up in the weather, but refunds aren't possible unless the roads are all closed.

"Everyone I talk to is saying business levels are healthy right now," Bindel said. He anticipates all this snow will translate to heads in beds the entire winter.

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