

Summer activities at ski resorts expected to grow

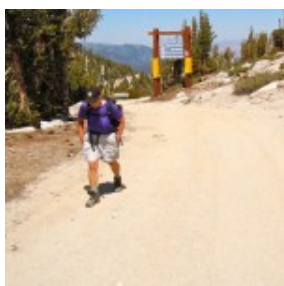
By Kathryn Reed

When the National Forest Ski Area Permit Act of 1986 was adopted, the assumption was Nordic and Alpine skiing were the only activities a ski resort would ever want or need to offer its users.

Clearly, things have changed.

But for resorts that operate on U.S. Forest Service land, the act is a bit prohibitive and some activities that are going on don't truly comply with what's allowed.

That all changed this month with President Obama signing the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act of 2011. One day "ski area" may have to be removed from the act's name and that of resorts to better reflect all that they offer.



The federal law will provide the opportunity for more hiking trails at Heavenly. Photo/LTN file

“The 2007 master plan said what (Heavenly) could look at in the future. There were things before that they didn’t go forward with because we didn’t know if it was allowable at a ski area. This will give us a way to consider summer activities and additional winter if they request,” Cheva Heck, local USFS spokeswoman, said.

She would not elaborate on specifics so as not to violate proprietary information. A spokesman for Heavenly did not respond to questions about how the act will affect the resort.

Heavenly already offers a number of things for guests to do during the summer – hiking, tubing, a rock wall, as well as a year-round lodge.

Sierra is keeping its options open for summer fun.

“We at Sierra have no plan to expand summer activities,” Steve Hemphill, resort spokesman, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s a definite possibility in the future. It opens doors.”

The new law does not allow a free-for-all. Parameters are still in place.

“The key is harmonizing with the natural environment,” Heck said. “Tennis courts, swimming pools and golf courses will not be allowed.”

Master plans must be adhered to, the Forest Service must sign off on changes and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency will have a role at resorts with property in the basin.

“Trail building has come a long way recently and the industry is sensitive to disturbance and erosion concerns. Our goals and policies specifically support outdoor, non-motorized recreation,” TRPA spokesman Jeff Cowen said. “When Heavenly began drafting their master plan, mountain biking wasn’t even considered. As far as recreation allocations, there are plenty available for the use.”

Kirkwood doesn't have TRPA to deal with because it is part of the Eldorado. Even so, Michael Dalzell, spokesman for Kirkwood, said the changes will not have an immediate impact at his resort.

"We already have a successful summer operation with mountain biking, hiking, disc golf, Zip Tahoe, events, etc. We are looking at potentially expanding our bike park," Dalzell said. "This new legislation may have a positive impact on how quickly any new plans will be approved by the Forest Service."

Even though much of Squaw Valley's land is privately owned, meaning the act doesn't have a substantial impact, the resort is happy to see the passage of the legislation.

"I think the act has wonderful implications for the ski industry as a whole. Offering summer activities allows resorts to remain operational year-round, meaning that families can enjoy our terrain throughout the year," Amelia Richmond, spokeswoman for Squaw, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It also means that resorts can employ more members of the local community on a year-round versus a winter seasonal basis, which benefits the local economy and employment."

In California, there are 25 ski areas on 11 national forests.

Regionally they include:

- Eldorado National Forest: Kirkwood and Sierra
- Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit: Heavenly
- Tahoe National Forest: Donner Ski Ranch, Boreal Ridge, Alpine Meadows, Squaw Valley and Sugar Bowl.

Diamond Peak, Homewood Mountain Resort and Northstar operate mostly on private property and therefore don't come under the umbrella of the two acts.

The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of public land,

with recreational activities contributing \$14.5 billion annually to the U.S. economy. But that isn't just at ski resorts.

There are 122 ski resorts on national forest land. The Forest Service averages 27 million visits annually to ski areas, which pumps \$4 billion into the economy, and provides 80,000 job.

Officials believe increasing summer recreation could add \$40 million more collectively to ski towns.