

No snow doesn't mean no skiing in Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

In 11 days, the first snow survey of the season will be conducted by the state Department of Water Resources. National Weather Service forecasters say the next two weeks will be dry and that the snowpack is 15 percent of normal.

In a normal month, South Lake Tahoe receives 1.84 inches of precipitation by Dec. 22 for the month of December. The city has received a trace this month.



Northstar's terrain park has plenty of snow to play in.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

For the entire month of December, Tahoe City averages 5.5 inches of precip. It has recorded zero this month.

Ski resorts for the 2010-11 season boasted of a record snowfall. Squaw Valley had more than 800 inches. This season resorts like Heavenly and Northstar are bragging about their snowmaking capabilities.

When will it snow?

“So many different global patterns and influences affect the weather. The main thing that needs to happen is the ridge of high pressure off the West Coast needs to shift and head south,” explained Scott McGuire, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Reno.

The La Nina jet stream is keeping storms north of Lake Tahoe. While the basin basks in sunshine, it is also freezing with below normal temperatures. The morning low Dec. 22 was 10 degrees in South Lake Tahoe. The normal low is 16 degrees.

“There is no indication this overall pattern is going to change for the better,” McGuire told *Lake Tahoe News*. “(Models) just show a couple storms trying to drop, so the southern edge of the storms may clip us. It’s hard to believe it will sit like this the entire winter, but it could.”

Drought conditions?

Last winter’s deluge has reservoirs in California and Nevada faring well so far – even better than a year ago this time. Lake Tahoe on Dec. 22 was at 6,226.85 feet, while on that date in 2010 it was at 6,224.37 feet.

It’s losing about one-hundredth of a foot a day because of evaporation – even more when it’s windy.

The Climate Prediction Center issues a “drought monitor” for the whole country. Tahoe was recently listed at the bottom rung, or “abnormally dry”. This is the first of five stages.

“If we don’t see improvement in January, they will probably worsen the outlook,” Gary Barbato, hydrologist and federal water master in Reno, said. “We typically have two good months left. We’ll see how we do.”

While there have been “March Miracles”, they are a rare occurrence. January and February need to be wet for any

optimism to continue.

Barbato said with Tahoe and Lahontan Reservoir being above average, he is not alarmed yet by the lack of snow – even though the wet season usually starts in November and it's been dry all this time.

Lake Tahoe, while it supplies water to some water purveyors in the basin, is the main water source for Reno via the Truckee River.

The Sierra snowpack is the source of water for much of California. Reservoirs in California are faring well despite a dry December.

“We are not unduly worried yet. The reservoirs are still in very good shape with carryover storage from last winter's storms,” Ted Thomas with the California Department of Water Resources told *Lake Tahoe News*. “This is a very dry December, obviously, one of the driest so far.”

Helping Mother Nature

There was a time when skiing at Christmas in Lake Tahoe was iffy. That was before snowmaking became the norm.

Those who skied on the manmade white stuff in the early days could not find anything positive to say about it. What comes out of the guns today is so far superior at times it's hard to distinguish between what is real and what is fake.

Another advantage customers have today is getting the truth about conditions from other skiers and riders. Resort and personal Facebook pages tell it like it is. No longer can resorts embellish the snow report.

Skiers at Northstar on Dec. 20 may have had doubts about the conditions based on riding a chairlift over rocks, grass and logs, but at the end of the ride were perfectly groomed conditions.

That's the other thing that has changed through the years – the groomers. Between the machine and the operators they lay out corduroy each day that makes people forget it didn't snow the night before.

So, there isn't tree skiing and Tahoe is waiting for its first powder day – those who like groomers or have a need to schuss are likely to be satisfied. Just don't look at what's at lake level to know what the slopes are all about. Plus, most of the resorts have made a concerted effort to have terrain parks open.

At Northstar this week skiers and boarders were spinning, jumping, back scratching, and twisting their way over features. The 22-foot superpipe where Shaun White will train is expected to be finished any day.

Heavenly had its terrain park operating on opening day – last month.

While most resorts in the greater Lake Tahoe area are open at some level, Heavenly has the largest snowmaking capabilities.

Heavenly can cover 73 percent of its mountain with manmade snow. Today about 25 percent of the resort's 97 trails are open. More are opening every day, with Boulder expected to open Christmas Day and Groove potentially, as well.

Northstar is bragging of snow depths of 18 to 24 inches on 25 trails. In a 24-hour period they use 5 million gallons of water to cover 100 acres.

Squaw uses 2,000 gallons of water per minute. It has a 12-inch base on eight runs.

"We could go all season making snow, but we hope Mother Nature will kick in and help us out at some point," Russ Pecoraro, Heavenly spokesman, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

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