

Vail Resorts buys Kirkwood Mountain for \$18 million

By Kathryn Reed

Vail Resorts has added a third Lake Tahoe area ski resort to its portfolio – Kirkwood Mountain Resort.

The \$18 million acquisition was announced today.

Pending approval of the U.S. Forest Service, which owns the bulk of the land that is mostly in Amador and Alpine counties – with a slice in El Dorado County, the deal will go through. The Colorado-based ski company will take over the resort, retail operations at the base and rights to develop an area near Timber Creek at the base of chairs 7 and 9.



Kirkwood is Vail Resort's third Tahoe area ski resort.

Photo/LTN file

The immediate change for skiers is anyone with a Heavenly or Northstar pass may ski at Kirkwood and anyone with a Kirkwood pass may ski at Heavenly or Northstar.

“Kirkwood skiers have a lot of passion because it is a really special place. One of the biggest things in our mind is to

respect what Kirkwood is – the vibe, the small community feel. We really want to make sure we support that,” Blaise Carrig, co-president of Vail Resort’s Mountain Division, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Kirkwood is much more of a big-mountain resort with its steep slopes compared to Heavenly (which Vail acquired in 2001) and Northstar (which Vail purchased in 2010).

The Wood, as locals call it, also attracts a different type of skier than Heavenly or Northstar. It’s more of a rugged individual who makes the nearly hour drive from South Lake Tahoe to Kirkwood over two mountain passes. After all, it’s a skull and cross bones that represent The Wall.

Plus, the snow at Kirkwood is usually deeper – nearly 800 inches last season – lighter and more constant than in Tahoe because of where the resort is located.

Kirkwood, though, needs some help to get to the next level in terms of infrastructure and improving the guest experience. It has two high-speed quad chairlifts, with one accessing beginner terrain.

“With every asset we look at what needs there are to improve the experience for the guests. We don’t have any specific plans at the moment,” Carrig said.

He said the sudden and dramatic improvements Vail Resorts did for this season at Northstar with the addition of a mid-mountain lodge and high-speed quad chairlift will not likely come as quickly to Kirkwood.

No dining facility at Kirkwood is memorable in a good way. The retail is basic.

Kirkwood’s master plan calls for substantial on-mountain improvements as well as real estate development.

Carrig said he is aware of the master plan, but it will take

time to prioritize what to do first.

He and Casey Blann, who heads mountain operations at Heavenly, will lead the management team at Kirkwood for the time being.

David Likins, who has been CEO of Kirkwood, will take on the same title at Kirkwood Mountain Development. That is the company that retains the rights to most of the real estate holdings at Kirkwood.

“This is a great day,” Likins told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Vail will get us to the next level of user and guest experience. They operate fantastic resorts throughout the West.”

Likins also said Vail’s desire to retain the uniqueness of Kirkwood was important before he would agree to the sale.

Vail is not worried about the price or reliability of power that has plagued Kirkwood in the past. State-of-the-art diesel generators are expected to be online in two weeks. These replace the plant that burned to the ground in January 2010.

Kirkwood Mountain Public Utility District is its own entity since July. Mountain Utilities was an arm of Mountain Springs Kirkwood, the umbrella firm that had owned the ski resort as well.