

Ski resort safety bill passes first hurdle

By Elyce Kirchner, Jeremy Carroll and Kevin Nious, NBC-Bay Area

A bill aimed at improving safety standards at ski resorts moved one step closer toward becoming law on Wednesday. This comes following an NBC Bay Area investigation that exposed numerous safety hazards at resorts across the state.

Senate Bill 564 would require ski areas to prepare an annual safety plan and make the number of accidents and fatalities available to the public.

The bill passed a Senate committee hearing Wednesday by a 6-1 margin.



It would be impossible to mark every obstacle at a ski resort. Photo/LTN file

Snowboarder Brian Kirby testified in support of the new regulations. In 2011, Kirby told NBC Bay Area that he nearly died after falling into an unmarked raven at a ski resort in Big Bear. He said the area has since been boarded up and blocked off to prevent future accidents.

“Why would you let someone enter the death trap before

blocking it off," Kirby told NBC Bay Area. He believes that with more oversight, his accident could have been prevented.

Julie Kozberg knows all too well that accidents like Kirby's are not uncommon at ski areas. In 2008, Kozberg's sister Olga Stepakova fell and hit her head on an unmarked bolder while skiing near Lake Tahoe. The 26-year-old was later pronounced brain dead and died at a local hospital.

"There were boulders, three stumps right over the snow that you could never see," Kozberg remembered. "A couple of days later, we had to bury my sister and life has never been the same. She was the only sister I've ever had."

Kirby and Kozberg hope a new ski safety bill sponsored by state Sen. William Monning, D-Carmel, will prompt resorts to be more transparent about the risks.

"When there are injuries or deaths, that should be a matter of public record," Monning told NBC Bay Area.

The bill would require ski resorts to prepare an annual safety plan and create a monthly accident report that will be made available to the public.

In February, former ski patroller Dick Penniman showed NBC Bay Area and NBC Los Angeles some of the safety hazards that lurk on the slopes. Penniman pointed out steel cables at neck height, rundown chairlifts, exposed metal poles, and degrading signage among other correctable safety concerns.

President of the California Ski Industry Association, Bob Roberts, says that ski resorts track every incident that happen on the mountain; however, his organization only supports making serious accidents public.

"In Sacramento, with three hearings to go, amendments happen and so our full board will reserve until we get to the end and see what the final document looks like," Roberts said.

The next hearing will be before the Senate committee on judiciary. Similar ski safety bills have been brought before Govs. Jerry Brown and Arnold Schwarzenegger and were ultimately vetoed. If SB564 manages to pass the state Legislature, it is not expected to reach the governor's desk until later this fall.