

Tahoe resorts make upgrades for ski season

By Paul McHugh, Sacramento Bee

One might imagine that it's all about snow and nothing else. But optimism is just as valuable a resource these days for skiers, snowboarders and resort operators in and around the region.

Last winter, both were in short supply. A few early storm dumps, backed up by snow-making, enabled an adequate holiday season. But New Year's Day led straight into the dry months that left ski conditions marginal by March, forcing an early season closure on many slopes.



Many Lake Tahoe area ski resorts want to open before Thanksgiving. Photo/LTN file

However, this fall meteorologists predict a mild El Niño – in other words, an “average” winter, and an improvement from the previous season. That notion is seconded by folklorists who cite signals as varied as early acorn drops, the coats on caterpillars and the gloss on black bear fur. The resorts are back to cultivating optimism and hoping for a robust run.

“Last season was challenging,” said Bob Roberts, CEO and

president of the California Ski Industry Association. "I'd estimate we had a fall-off of about 12 percent (from the previous year's attendance), for a total of less than 7 million visits to our resorts. Yet economic yields were still good, since early season-pass sales now establish a solid base. And new efficiencies in services, as well as expansion into summer operations, increasingly help most resorts to stay profitable."

In preparing for the coming months, California resorts have generally been burnishing their appeal by expanding programs and making facility improvements, rather than by championing big-infrastructure additions that won headlines in seasons past. However, there are notable exceptions, including Sugar Bowl and feisty up-and-comer Sierra-at-Tahoe.

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