

# Snowmaking saving Lake Tahoe's ski season

By Lisa M. Krieger, San Jose Mercury News

These are the unlikely saviors in the lofty peaks of the serene Sierra: high-tech snow machines, roaring like jets and spewing million-dollar crystals.

"If it wasn't for snowmaking, we probably wouldn't be open," said Barrett Burghard, head snowmaker at Heavenly Mountain Resort, who is propping up the beleaguered mountain economy with his vast computer-driven complex of snow guns, pumps, compressors, pipes, hydrants, nozzles and miles of hoses.

Mother Nature, always fickle, has been especially cruel this drought year to the resorts and mountain communities that depend on snow for their economic survival. Instead of fluffy powder, there's just granite, mud and manzanita.

Innovations in technology – such as the \$40,000 Super PoleCat, with a built-in automated weather station that alters man-made snow characteristics – make it possible to produce an acre of thigh-deep snow in an hour. That's enough to blanket a football field with snow 8 feet deep during a three-hour game.

In this dry and balmy winter, the small, historic and family-owned resorts without extensive snow making – such as Donner Ski Ranch or Dodge Ridge – haven't opened, costing jobs and starving local businesses. The National Winter Trail Days event at Tahoe Donner Cross Country Ski and Snowshoe Center was canceled. But big corporations running Heavenly, Northstar, Kirkwood, Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows and Mammoth Mountain have made major investments in snow-making tools. Squaw Valley alone has spent \$5.2 million since 2012. This month virtually all of the snow at the resorts came out of machines.

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