

Utah plan would link 7 ski resorts

By Brady McCombs, AP

SALT LAKE CITY – More than three decades after the idea was first discussed, general managers at seven Utah ski resorts announced Wednesday they are committed to finally building a series of chairlifts that would link their ski areas and give the state a European-style experience.

But it won't be available to skiers anytime soon.

Utah ski officials made clear during a news conference that it's a concept, not a plan, with no hard timeline. Dozens of key decisions still need to be made, and the project will require permits and approvals from government officials. One general manager said he thinks it could take a decade to complete.



Mike Goar of Canyons Resort speaks March 19 about reviving plans for a series of interconnected chairlifts that would link seven ski areas. Photo/Rick Bowmner/AP

The project is expected to cost up to \$30 million, paid for

entirely by the resorts, said Nathan Rafferty, president of Ski Utah, a trade organization representing the ski resorts.

It would link Alta Ski Area, Brighton Resort, Canyons Resort, Deer Valley Resort, Park City Mountain Resort, Snowbird Ski Resort and Solitude Mountain Resort. Skiers who buy one pass would have access to 100 lifts, 750 ski runs and more than 18,000 skiable acres.

By combining 25 square miles of terrain, the Utah resorts could offer North America's largest skiing complex – three times the size of Vail, Colo., and twice as big as Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia.

Rafferty said it would create an experience unique to North America. In Europe, lifts connecting ski areas are common. In the U.S., a daily pass to a ski resort usually confines you to that resort no matter how close a neighboring resort is.

If completed, the linking lifts would bring the spotlight to Utah's ski community and put it in prime position to lure skiers from popular resorts in Colorado and California, ski officials said.

"You combine that with our accessibility and the airport, and there's not a ski community in this country that can beat us," said Jenni Smith, Park City Mountain Resort general manager.

The new proposal will reopen a debate that has long triggered strong opposition from backcountry skiers, wilderness advocates and municipal water officials.

Carl Fisher, executive director of Save Our Canyons, said the ski resorts already have a sufficient footprint on the Wasatch Range, and linking lifts would ruin pristine areas used by outdoor enthusiasts.

"It's a gimmick, a marketing ploy," he said. "They are trying to use to attract more tourists."

Rafferty said the resorts are committed to maintaining the watershed, preserving backcountry ski terrain and going through all the necessary public permitting. They'll continue talking with Fisher's group and others with concerns, he said.

The latest proposal calls for the lifts to be built on private land. However, Fisher said he doesn't think it's possible for linking lifts to avoid affecting public land. Even if the lifts are on private property woven amid public parcels, the ski runs likely would be on forest land, he said.

And it's not just about ski season. Hiking trails used in the summer would be affected as well, Fisher noted.

"You're going to be hiking around lift towers instead of rocks and trees," he said. "You're going to be looking at cable and chairs instead of wildlife."

Alta Ski Area general manager Onno Wieringa said he hopes the project can be accomplished in the next decade. But he said it will come down to each ski area crunching the numbers and seeing if it makes sense financially.

"Before we would invest \$10 million or \$5 million or whatever, we've got to feel that we're going to get some return on that money," Wieringa said.

Though completion of the concept may be years away, having all seven ski resorts agree on the parameters is a significant step, said Mike Goar, general manager at Canyons Resort. They've reached outlines for revenue sharing and identified three sites for connection points. The project now has a name, "One Wasatch," and a website with maps and information.

"The idea was finally baked enough," Goar said.

All seven said making it happen is long overdue. When Wieringa's children, now in their early 20s, were tiny, he and his wife dreamed of their children being able to take an

interconnected lift from the small town of Alta over the mountain ridge to Park City to go to school.

“It gets off the dime and makes us accountable to the process,” Wieringa said. “It is going to put a little heat on us.”