

Tahoe area ski resorts adapting to climate change, trying to attract newbies

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – In spite of the challenges of climate change and a shrinking snowboarding clientele, the ski resort industry is going strong, according to those in the know.

“The market and demand is still out there,” Bob Roberts, president of the California Ski Industry Association, said at this week’s Truckee-Donner Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting.

Lake Tahoe is a critical piece to the state’s overall ski market with half of the visits being to one of the local resorts and more than half of the revenue generated here.

California had been averaging 7.4 million skier visits a year until three years ago. Last season it plummeted to 5.3 million visits. Mother Nature didn’t cooperate so the skiers and riders found something else to do.

It’s hard to attract people when resorts like Mount Shasta were open four days and Dodge Ridge 33 days. Shasta bought goodwill by offering those who purchased a season pass last year to roll it over to this season.



Bob Roberts, California Ski
Industry Association
president, addresses
industry concerns and goals
Nov. 18. Photo/LTN

Roberts on Nov. 18 acknowledged that snowmaking might have to regularly augment what naturally falls.

Resorts are beefing up their snowmaking capability, putting them on more runs and constantly working to make what comes out of the guns as close to "real" snow as possible.

"We had passholders who skied more than 100 days last year. We know we can deliver that again this year," Rachael Woods with Northstar said.

Jeff Monson with Sugar Bowl said his resort off Interstate 80 put in \$500,000 worth of snowmaking equipment, which includes 25 guns that can provide top to bottom skiing. The goal is when Sugar Bowl opens for its 75th season on Nov. 26 there will be three lifts with 1,500 vertical feet.

"We are blowing more snow, more efficiently," Monson told the packed room at Truckee Airport.

Heavenly Mountain Resort and Northstar have two of the largest snowmaking operations on the West Coast, which is allowing both resorts to open today.

When it comes to snowboarding it is hitting the Southern California market the hardest, Roberts said. The problem is younger people are not picking up the sport. It is an issue Roberts and his colleagues are trying to figure out how to remedy.

Ski resort officials who spoke at the meeting talked about various learn to ski-ride programs that make snowsports more affordable.

Paul Raymore with Homewood Mountain Resort said the West Shore resort is bringing back free lessons for intermediate and advanced skiers-riders.

Roberts said one benefit of the consolidation of resorts is season passes are getting people to ski beyond their one favorite resort. And resorts that aren't owned by the same company are partnering to offer combined passes.

"Season pass sales are running ahead of last year," Roberts said. "The indicators are the market is still strong."

In the last five years more than \$500 million has been spent by Tahoe area resorts on upgrading their product. Some of this is for summer fun as they evolve into year-round destinations.

Roberts said Reno-Tahoe International Airport landing direct flights from England and Mexico would also help the local industry. He said Californians tend to spend \$175/day on an average ski day, whereas travelers from abroad spend \$300 per day and tend to stay at least seven days.