

# Drought 'devastating' for Tahoe ski industry

By Kathryn Reed

Adapting to change is the only way ski resorts are going to survive.

That was the message John Rice, general manager of Sierra-at-Tahoe, delivered to more than 40 people on Wednesday afternoon at Lake Tahoe Community College.

He refused to engage in the debate of why things are changing, but he said there is no denying things are changing.

Sierra averages 480 inches of snow a season. It received 140 inches this season – a record. The resort near Echo Summit was open for 94 days. Another record. It closed March 16 – the earliest on record. These aren't the kinds of records any resort wants.

Sierra had 1,200 people from Intel booked in March. The resort had to cancel because of conditions.



John Rice with Sierra-at-Tahoe on April 15 talks about the impact of drought on ski resorts. Photo/LTN

Rice said the drought is having a “devastating” affect on the industry. Less money being generated means fewer people to hire, which ultimately affects so many businesses in town.

It used to be people would book ski trips months, even years in advance. Now it’s more spontaneous. With weather data at people’s fingertips and more accurate ski reports from resorts, the guesswork has been eliminated. People can go to where the snow is or stay away from the sparsely covered slopes.

For the resorts without snow this is not a good thing for the bottom line. And with the greater Lake Tahoe area suffering from its fourth winter of lousy conditions, Rice said, all resorts are dealing with a slump in season pass sales and group sales. Skiers aren’t willing to take a gamble on Tahoe right now even though in winter 2010-11 Sierra had 869 inches of snow.

Snow totals at Donner Summit have been kept since the late 1800s. Multi-winter low snow years are not unusual, Rice pointed out. But there is no crystal ball to know when Mother Nature will change her ways.

To cope with dry cycles resorts are going to have to be creative with what they offer. Sierra was bringing in people to its 30,000-square-foot plaza with music and events. People who often avoid Tahoe in the winter because of the roads could come experience snow. It’s about providing an experience they can’t get at home.

Sitting by a fire pit surrounded by pine trees, roasting s’mores, wine tasting, tubing, ice skating are all things various Tahoe resorts offer. It’s not just about the skiing and snowboarding.

A resort in Vermont has an indoor water park. Camp Woodward, the nearest being at Boreal, is extreme sports indoors.

While many resorts boast about their snowmaking capabilities, Sierra can only cover 4 percent of its slopes with man-made snow. Industry numbers are that between 17 and 25 percent of the water used for snowmaking is lost, the rest returns to the aquifer.

Sierra is more known for snow farming – taking the white stuff off parking lots and areas of the mountain and repurposing it on skiable terrain. Last winter an employee used a 5-gallon bucket from home and a resort shovel to start filling in bare spots.

Rice praised his initiative that turned into a 100-person bucket brigade. It was about employees trying to be resourceful, stay employed and doing their part.

Summer grooming helps Sierra open with a decent layer of snow. Take a look at a run like Lower Main. It's pretty smooth. Without boulders and uneven terrain, it means it will be covered faster and sooner than some other runs.

Places like Northstar and Heavenly are turning to active summer activities like ropes courses and mountain biking. Rice said without a closer bed base Sierra does not see this as a viable option. It will, though, be expanding into the wedding business in the summer.

Resorts are also putting together season pass programs that involve multiple resorts. This is good when the home resort's conditions are sketchy. While it means free skiing, the resorts benefit because people buy food, souvenirs and may extend their stay. Plus, people see this as added value.

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## **Notes:**

- The next Tahoe Talks Brown Bag lunch is May 20, noon-1:30pm in LTCC's board room. It will be a panel discussion about

cycling's impact on Tahoe's economy