

Opinion: Snowmaking is logical even in a drought

By Richard Solbrig

Winter has arrived in the Tahoe basin with very welcome early snow events and freezing night time temperatures, allowing snowmaking operations to commence to help open ski resorts early. Given California's drought and the district's request for continued water conservation, one may wonder about the wisdom of using water for snowmaking.



While we are in a drought and are under state mandates to conserve water, we are not currently experiencing a water shortage in our service area. One of the challenges the district currently faces is balancing the needs of our community and our compliance with California regulations. We are under a mandate to reduce water consumption by 20 percent, and we are required to enforce restrictions on landscape water use and certain commercial applications. There is no specific restriction in the regulations regarding the use of water for snowmaking.

District staff and the board of directors believe that we must take a prudent approach to conservation and attempt to minimize any negative financial impacts on our customers. The district has had extensive water conservation measures in place for more than 10 years. When considering additional restrictions to help meet our conservation target, it was decided to focus on landscape water use and waste. The restrictions were designed to allow our customers to maintain their existing landscapes, and their investment in them, while reducing overall water use and meeting state mandates.

Our community needs ski resorts and snow to continue to

attract visitors because we have a tourism-based economy. Heavenly Mountain Resort is one of the largest employers in our community and provides abundant recreation opportunities for our visitors as well as our residents. By restricting the amount of water available to Heavenly for snowmaking, we could negatively impact our local economy and our community.

It should also be noted that Heavenly pays the same commercial rate for water as all of our other commercial customers. However, we have an agreement with Heavenly that allows us to immediately cease to provide them with water for snowmaking in the event that the district declares a water shortage emergency, such as during a fire event.

The sole source of the district's water supply is groundwater. We monitor the water depths in our wells regularly to ensure an adequate, stable water supply. In the event that our wells begin to show significant impacts from the drought, the district will implement additional conservation measures to protect our water supply, which could include restricting snow making.

Richard Solbrig is executive director of South Tahoe Public Utility District.