

Ski industry hopeful riders return to slopes

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – A sense of enthusiasm is in the air when people start talking skiing in the Sierra. At least for this season.

Mother Nature is cooperating with ski executives' desire to have plenty of white stuff available pre-Thanksgiving. Natural snow combined with freezing overnight temps that are ideal for snowmaking are allowing many resorts to open this week – with all three of Vail Resorts' Tahoe properties opening Saturday.

“There's so much optimism for the season,” Mike Reitzell, president of the California Ski Industry Association, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Reitzell on Tuesday completed a 36-day tour of 23 California resorts. It was a 3,500-mile journey that ended that day at Shasta Ski Resort.

The morning of Nov. 10 was spent talking to the Truckee Donner Chamber of Commerce and hearing from North Shore industry folks.

Reitzell is new to the job, having taken over for Bob Roberts earlier this year. Reitzell's roots are with the legal side of the ski industry. He worked for Duane Morris LLP's Truckee office. The firm specializes in sports and recreation law.

He acknowledges membership in the association has dropped in recent years. It's something he is paying attention to. The association is made up of a mix of downhill and cross country resorts. The board is considering expanding membership to other ski related entities like visitors authorities, though they would not be voting members.



Northstar on Nov. 10 is shrouded in clouds, while its slopes are covered with snow. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While this season is starting out well, the industry – especially in California-Nevada – has taken a beating because of the lack of snow. For the last four-drought years snowfall is 75 percent of average. Most resorts last year were never able to open all of their terrain. Many lifts stopped running well before their normal mid-April closing.

Lack of snow and terrain has in turn led to a decline in skier visits the last four years. Stats from the California Ski Industry Association show 7.7 million skier visits in 2010-11, 5.9 million in 2011-12, 5.8 million in 2012-13, 5.4 million in 2013-14, and 4.6 million in 2014-15. That is a 40 percent drop.

“Smaller resorts have had a difficult time, but they are all still here,” Reitzell said. “They recognize the need for a fiscally sound business.”

He said there is a resiliency among resort operators, noting they’ve weathered droughts and other economic downturns besides the current situation.

Still, the lack of visitors has many resorts turning to other activities besides skiing and snowboarding – like ropes courses, music, and indoor fun.

One of the more than 100 people at the Tuesday meeting asked what could be done to attract millennials and families.

For Reitzell, he said it's about packaging lessons and equipment at a good price point. It's also just about getting them to the mountains. Playing in the snow is a start, then perhaps they will want to graduate to the slopes.

Greg Dallas, CEO of Sugar Bowl-Royal Gorge, isn't convinced the Tahoe market as a destination is overpriced for families. He pointed to how Disneyland is \$120 a day and families are still going there.

He and Reitzell said how the smaller, feeder resorts can attract the newbies, get them to fall in love with the sport and create lifelong riders.

For Beth Howard, vice president and general manager of Northstar, what keeps people returning is the brand promise – from snow surface to culinary excellence to traditions.

“There's a tremendous variety offered by all resorts in California,” Reitzell said. “Whatever experience people want they can find it in California.”