

Squaw-Alpine invest \$4M for avalanche control

By Kathryn Reed

Combined, Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows ski resorts are getting \$4 million worth of safety improvements that will be used starting this season. All are centered on avalanche control.

A variety of tools have been added. For the first time a helicopter will be enlisted. The resort is leasing an ASTAR AS-350B3 from Minden's Skydance Helicopters. Squaw-Alpine are the only resorts in California using a helicopter for this type of work, though Alta, Snowbird, Telluride and Whistler Blackcomb use one.

Using the helicopter would help get the mountains open sooner.

"The helicopter enables us to assess snow conditions around the mountain, using test explosives, in under 30 minutes. We can use it to drop explosives onto the terrain below and transport our teams up onto the mountain to complete their avalanche control routes on the ground," Will Paden, Squaw Valley ski patrol director, said in a statement.

Skydance pilots will fly the bird, with specifically trained ski patrol employees launching the devices.

The helicopter will be stationed near the Far East building and chairlift in the high season, with the ability to have them fly in from Minden at other times.

"All of these investments were voluntary. Our first priority as a company has always been safety, and that priority is evident not only in this season's expansion, but the millions that we have invested in snow safety over the years," Liesl

Hepburn, spokeswoman for the resorts, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She said the upgrades are not a reaction to the January death of ski patroller Joseph Zuiches at Squaw Valley. CalOSHA found infractions at the ski resort and fined Squaw \$11,250 for "failing to correct an identified unsafe working condition by implementing a procedure for protection against the workplace hazards associated with hang cord entanglement during hang cord blasting operations." The second fine of \$9,000 was for "failing to ensure that all crew members maintained visual contact or awareness of physical location of crew members at all times during avalanche control activities." Squaw is appealing the decision, saying the state's findings are not accurate and the fines not justified.

With the 728 inches of snow last season, it meant avalanche control was needed almost every third day. In all, 56 days of avalanche control were required.

Another tool that will be available this season is the avalauncher, which can send an explosive more than a mile. Alpine has been using them and will get two additional ones. Squaw used them in the past; and now will have two.

They allow ski patrollers to trigger avalanches from a distance and control the snowpack prior to the resort opening. They are compressed-nitrogen cannons that fire an explosive projectile.

Dragons are another resource for snow safety. It's something Squaw has been using since 2015. A combination of propane gas and oxygen are used to create a concussive blast to trigger an avalanche. The discharge is done remotely. Thirteen have been added to the arsenal.

Several will be placed along Alpine Meadows Road. This is always a precarious location. Last year debris from an avalanche impacted several houses.

Ski patrol at both resorts is rather significant, with 34 pro patrollers at Alpine Meadows, 70 at Squaw Valley. Nearly two thirds of Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows ski patrollers have more than 10 years of patrol experience. If national ski patrollers are trained and licensed to perform avalanche control, then they may help out.

“The goal is to have as many patrollers as possible trained on these tools, but with newer ones like the helicopter it will take more time to develop those groups,” Hepburn said.