

Family-owned Calif. ski resorts struggle from drought

By Scott Smith, AP

With California entering its fourth drought year, even some big resorts with millions of dollars in modern snow-making equipment don't have all their lifts running.

The midsized and family-owned resorts struggling most had hoped to reopen for the Presidents Day holiday, traditionally the year's biggest weekend for skiing.

A recent winter storm that washed over the state originated in the tropics and dropped more rain than the much-needed snow. While any wet weather is welcome in California, the storm didn't end the drought or put all the dormant resorts back in business.

"We're basically the canary in the coal mine," said Janet Tuttle, who owns Donner Ski Ranch northwest of Lake Tahoe and one of about seven resorts forced to close mid-season. "It's kind of a sad state here in California."

A stingy snowfall had left Donner's mountain face marked with brown patches of exposed dirt and rock. Tuttle and her husband, Marshall, closed the resort's six chairlifts and two beginner runs by mid-January. They reopened Wednesday with a little boost from the recent storm, hoping to keep the lifts running this weekend.

She worried about more warm weather in the forecast. "I'm not very happy about that," she said.

California's 27 resorts – and two in neighboring Nevada – make up the nation's second-most-popular destination for skiers and snowboarders after Colorado, said Bob Roberts, executive

director of the California Ski Industry Association.

China Peak Mountain Resort east of Fresno was among the latest ski areas forced to suspend business, following others in Northern California such as Donner Ski Ranch, Dodge Ridge and Yosemite's Badger Pass. Mt. Baldy Ski Lifts near Los Angeles also closed.

Homewood Mountain Resort at Lake Tahoe suspended skiing early this month but also plans to open for the Presidents Day weekend with a few inches of fresh snow from recent storms.

Ski season started strong with heavy snowfall in December blanketing California's mountains. Resorts opened before Christmas, earlier than the previous year, with raised hopes that more snow would follow.

But January set records as the driest and the second warmest in recorded history, said Michael Anderson, a climatologist with the state's Department of Water Resources. The Sierra Nevada this January received 2 percent of its normal precipitation, with an average high temperature of 53 degrees, he said.

In an unsettling trend, four of California's 10 driest Januaries have occurred since 2007, said Anderson, adding that several days recently at Lake Tahoe have reached the mid-60s. He spent last weekend with his family in the Sierra's Donner Summit, where it rained.

"When it's raining at the top of the mountain, it's awful hard to build a snowpack," he said.

Other Western states have gotten their share of snow this year, said Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association, noting favorable skiing in Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and Montana. He said storms have hit Washington, but the warm temperatures pushed the snow level to higher elevations.

Meanwhile, much of California remains locked in extreme drought.

Tim Cohee, owner of China Peak Mountain Resort, thought he could keep the lifts running through Presidents Day weekend. But Cohee said that only the beginner skiing hill and a slope for sleds and inner-tubes would be open for the holiday.

China Peak has snow-making machines, but the warm weather gave Cohee few opportunities to turn them on. The recent rain made the mountain blotchy, so he suspended skiing. Cohee said China Peak and other small resorts are facing serious financial hardship.

"Name a business that could go through four years of this," said Cohee, who has owned and managed ski resorts in California for 22 years. "I've seen a couple wimpy years before, but nothing like this – nothing even close."

At the large Heavenly Lake Tahoe, a little more than half of the ski runs were open Tuesday, but spokeswoman Rachael Woods of Vail Resorts said those runs are long and well-groomed, providing skiers and boarders with great conditions.

The runs are fully open at Kirkwood Mountain Resort, owned by the same company, and one of California's highest in elevation, said Woods, adding that Kirkwood, Heavenly and Northstar all received well over a foot of snow from the recent storms.

Cold overnight temperatures at the high elevation ski areas have allowed for making snow, she said, adding, "There are many resorts that are doing well."

Berry, the National Ski Areas Association's president, said ski resort operators are optimists by nature; they have to be, he said, adding that a powerful storm may still hit California deluging the mountains and turning the season around in 24 hours. He ran Kirkwood Mountain Resort for 13 years and has

seen it happen.

“Mother Nature can be cruel,” Berry said. “She can also be incredibly generous.”