

Drought alters the face of Tahoe tourism

By Dale Kasler and Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Drought is reshaping Lake Tahoe and its all-important tourism industry.

Seven ski resorts have shut down early for the season because of a shortage of snow. The latest is Sugar Bowl Resort, which will turn off its chairlifts at the close of business Sunday.

The long-term impact goes deeper. As California's drought stretches into its fourth year, ski resorts, hotel owners and others are scrambling to find new ways to get tourists to the lake. They're relying less on snow and putting greater emphasis on entertainment, fine dining and other forms of recreation. With climatologists predicting long-term declines in snowfall throughout the Sierra Nevada, some resorts are building zip lines, mountain bike trails and even wedding venues, all in hopes of broadening their customer base.



Heavenly Mountain Resort is on track to expand its offerings with more year-round activities that don't depend on snow. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

“Resorts have been looking at their business models and seeing we have to be in the mountain recreation business, not the winter business,” said Bob Roberts, head of the California Ski Industry Association.

Tahoe isn’t giving up on traditional winter activities. Squaw Valley Resort, for instance, has spent tens of millions of dollars upgrading its facilities in the past few years, including a \$5 million investment in additional snow-making equipment.

Nonetheless, the tourist attractions are conjuring up different ways to lure visitors. It’s telling that Squaw Valley is hosting its first-ever bluegrass and craft-beer festival this weekend, just a few weeks after it canceled a World Cup skiing and snowboarding tournament because of the poor conditions.

The closures are particularly painful for two reasons: One, the season had gotten off to a good start, thanks to two strong storms in December. Two, the Tahoe tourism industry was just beginning to climb out of a long period of hibernation prompted by the recession and fierce competition from California Indian casinos. Developers have been pouring millions into ski resorts, hotels and other amenities in hopes of weaning Tahoe from its historic dependence on gambling and turning the lake into an international destination and not just a day trip from Sacramento.

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