Ski exec: California industry thriving

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – Those living in Lake Tahoe know the ski industry is big business. But it's also a lucrative industry for the state of California with a $1.3 billion annual impact.

Michael Reitzell, executive director of the California Ski Industry Association, and Daphne Lange with Visit California, the state tourism agency, spoke at the Truckee Chamber of Commerce breakfast this month about trends in the industry.

California averages nearly 7 million skier visits a season. Colorado's average is 20 million. Nationally the average is 56 million.

Half of those skiers in California are going to the Tahoe-Shasta area, while 30 percent are hitting the Central Sierra slopes – which includes Mammoth. What makes this market different, according to Reitzell, is that people spend more money in this region. This area captures 57.1 percent of the skier-boarder dollars or $742.8 million a year.

"Participation is strong and steady," Reitzell told the group. One thing that is changing is people are doing more than just skiing – they are participating in the other activities resorts offer.

In recent years there have been more skiers on the slopes, while the number of snowboarders is decreasing. Seventy percent of those skiers are younger than 50.

Reitzell in part attributed the increase in skiers to better equipment, newbies seeing their friends and family members on skis, and the Olympics introducing more exciting events that

in the past had been dominated by snowboarders.

Snow clearly is what makes the difference in whether people are coming to Tahoe. Last season there were 7.3 million skier visits in the state – so more than average. Even though it was normal snow-wise, it came after three years of substandard snowfall. The 2014-15 skier visit total in California was 4.4 million.

When it comes to marketing the area, Tahoe falls under the High Sierra region for the state. Ninety-three percent of the trips to the state are domestic travelers, but the international travelers account for 20 percent of the spending.

Half of the visitors to California come from either Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Colorado or Arizona, according to Lange.

The 2015 tourism numbers improved over 2014:

· Total direct spending – $2.7 billion – 5.7 percent change

· Tourism supported jobs – 29,400 – 3.1 percent change

· Local tax receipts – $108 million – 9 percent change

· State tax receipts – $110 million – 1. 8 percent change.

While promoting the resorts in the state is one of the ski association's main responsibilities, safety and sustainability are the other two key platforms.

"Our resorts even in normal times can be right around where the snow is. We have to be concerned if the snow levels rise," Reitzell said.

His agency is also worried about the rising number of fires as

the climate changes. Because of this the association is working with the U.S. Forest Service in regards to fire suppression funding. Most of the state’s ski resorts are on Forest Service land.