

Location, location, location: Filming increases in Tahoe

Applications for California's new film tax credits will be available next month, an exciting prospect for the Placer County Film Office

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PLACER COUNTY — In 2001, director Tom Shadyac filmed a scene for his movie “Dragonfly” in the Forest Hill area of Placer County.

With the help of a few 40-foot-tall potted palm trees and some ferns, the section of the Middle Fork American River that hosts Coffeepot Rapids and Tunnel Chute played the part of a jungle river in the Venezuelan mountains. There, the crew staged a scene in which Dr. Joe Darrow, Kevin Costner, is plucked from a submerged bus that shoots through the deadly rapids.

Less than a week later, a scene set in an Alaskan mine was filmed for the television movie “Gentle Ben.” The location of this scene was approximately one-mile away from the one used for “Dragonfly.”

Up to 2001, Placer County's diverse terrain and ability to offer film crews four seasons within an hour's drive attracted scenes for feature films at least once a year, according to the director of the Placer County Film Office, Beverly Lewis.

But when other states figured out how to attract production projects by offering film tax incentives, projects born in California began seeking their financial refuge, a trend commonly referred to as “runaway productions.”

In turn, Placer County has not enjoyed such steady movie, television and commercial shoots as they did years ago, Lewis said.

California's new film tax credits hope to change all that.

In light of the economic downturn, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation on Feb. 20 creating tax credits for film and television productions in California.

As the tax provision is required to start at the beginning of the state's fiscal year, July 1, qualified productions will soon be able to secure these tax credits — applications available June 1. But while qualified applicants will have this year and next year to accrue the tax credits, they cannot be claimed until the 2010/2011 tax season.

Because of this timing, a lot of projects may not get underway until later this year or early next year, meaning California may not see the effects of the tax credits immediately, Lewis said.

But the case for film tax incentives is obvious once you see the kinds of numbers they generate, Lewis added.

And while California stands to benefit from these tax incentives in the coming years, the variety of looks Placer County offers could once again bring steady filming back to the area.

“I’m just hoping the productions that are getting selected have scripts that need locations we can provide,” Lewis said.

‘A producer’s dream’

The Placer County Film Office, which is part of the economic development office, helps match production companies’ needs for a location to available properties around the county.

When location managers need a variety looks in a single spot, Lewis often takes them to White Wolf, the 460-acre plot of land nestled between Alpine Meadows Ski Resort and Squaw Valley USA that has become one of the more popular filming locations in Placer County.

“As soon as I saw White Wolf I said to myself, ‘this place is a gold mine, there are so many amenities in one place,’” Lewis said.

With steep, rocky, cliffs, wide open meadows, streams and lakes, White Wolf is a one stop shop for film crews with a need to fill frames with rustic scenery.

But maybe more appealing than the stunning landscape is the fact that White Wolf is private land, a perk for film crews who take advantage of all the resources owners Troy and Sue Caldwell have.

When cast and crew arrive, two large on-site parking lots await their large trucks, trailers and loads of gear.

When it’s time to shoot, either Troy Caldwell or Ray O’Brien, a Captain with the North Tahoe Fire Protection District that often helps out on set, will give the cast and crew a lift via snowcat or snowmobile wherever they need to go.

And if something breaks on set, the Caldwell’s garage has many of the tools needed to quickly fix a problem and continue shooting.

“Between Troy and I we can usually figure out how to do just about anything,” O’Brien said.

In February, Kurtis Productions, a Chicago-based documentary production company, filmed at White Wolf for five days for the Investigation Discover Channel series “Escape.”

The episode centers around Eric LeMarque, who, in 2004, got lost snowboarding on Mammoth Mountain and spent seven days surviving in the wilderness after which time he lost his legs to frostbite.

“They could have filmed in Mammoth, the place where the incident actually happened, but they chose White Wolf primarily because the ease of being able to shoot in a location that looked like it was in the middle of nowhere but really wasn’t,” Lewis said.

Weeks later, the Caldwells hosted the filming of “The Sierra,” a half-hour western written, directed and starred in by Alano Massi.

For Massi, the appeal of filming at White Wolf was the variety of scenes he could shoot and the Caldwell’s accommodating attitudes and experience dealing with film crews.

“We had seven horses on the shoot and the snow had to be packed down enough to make sure the horses and riders were safe while filming,” Massi said. “Every day Troy was out there on his snowcat packing down snow for the day’s shoot.”

“It was perfect,” Massi added. “There wasn’t anything more I could have wanted out of a location.”

Erika Frick agrees.

As the producer for Reno-based FLF films, Frick was the “logistics lady” responsible for setting the budget, hiring the crew, negotiating for equipment and arranging travel for “The Sierra.”

“Shooting at White Wolf is a producers dream,” she said. “The best part of the location is that you have all the space and resources you could want in a location and at the same time it’s laid right out there for you.”

With 40 people on set every day, a five-ton electrical truck, three-ton camera truck, a portable seven-horse corral, a wardrobe, make-up and hair vehicle, a motor home for the actors and an indoor shelter to keep crew out of the cold, it helps to have everything in one spot.

The price is appealing, but it’s what you get for the money that makes it a great filming location, Frick said.

State of play

Production crews spend a lot of money on location, Lewis said, and as states began to realize how much they stood to gain by being film production friendly, they set up incentives to entice film projects.

Film production is a competitive business, and states have gone out of their way to attract the film industry, Lewis said. “It’s a product and they need to make money so they’re going to go where it’s cheapest to film” she added.

In Louisiana, for example, studios and soundstages are eligible for state tax credits worth up to 40 percent of the value of the project. In addition, investors backing productions of films in the state may receive credits of up to 25 percent. A 10 percent labor tax credit is also given for all state residents employed on production projects.

From 1996 to 1998, Lewis worked as the film liaison for the Louisiana Film Office. During her years there, Lewis said the U.S. saw a lot of runaway productions that went to Canada to take advantage of the monetary exchange rate and the enticing tax incentives.

In 1998, during her exit interview with Mark Smith, the head of Louisiana’s economic development department’s film division, Smith told her that he was going to set up tax incentives that would rival Canada’s.

By 2003, the first full year the incentives had been in place, the realized economic impact of film production in Louisiana was \$92 million, Lewis said. It had been only \$12 million the year before.

A state-commissioned report released earlier this year showed that more than 65 film and television productions spent \$429 million in Louisiana in 2007 — the latest year for which figures are available.

Of that, roughly half was spent on payroll for Louisiana residents who served as extras and crew members. The rest went to goods and services such as costumes, equipment, trucks and lighting, according to the Associated Press.

“When I came to the film office in Placer County in the late ‘90s there were only about three states that had film tax incentives,” Lewis said. “Today there are about 40.”

And as California joins the majority of states with film tax incentives, it stands to reason that with Placer County’s long list of locations, we could see more film production in the area.

“It certainly suggests that that could be the case,” Lewis said when asked if she expects the film tax credits to have a positive impact on the county.

But while it could take years for the state to see benefits from the tax incentives, there are some positive omens that suggest Placer County is on the minds of producers.

This weekend, Lewis will be giving location managers based out of Los Angeles a tour of Placer County in what she calls a “fam tour,” which is short for familiarization tour.

“It’s the first fam tour we’ve had here in Placer County because, without the film tax credits, there hasn’t been a reason to bring a group of people in to scout locations,” Lewis said.

More online

Visit www.sony.com/tumble to watch a commercial that features Placer County’s famed White Wolf location or tune in to the Investigation Discovery Channel on May 25 at 10 p.m. to see it in “Backcountry Blizzard,” the story of Eric LeMarque.

California’s film tax credits at a glance

How funds are allocated?

- \$100 million annually beginning fiscal year 2009/2010 through fiscal year 2013/2014
- \$10 million set aside for independent films
- Any unused funds carryover to the next fiscal year

Productions eligible for 20 percent tax credit

- Feature Films (\$1 million minimum - \$75 million maximum production budget)
- Movies of the week or miniseries (\$500,000 minimum production budget)
- New television series licensed for original distribution on basic cable (\$1 million minimum budget)

Productions eligible for 25 percent tax credit

- Television series that filmed all of its prior seasons outside of California
- Independent films (\$1 million ? \$10 million budget that is produced by a company that is not publicly traded and that publicly traded companies do not own more than 25% of the producing company.