

Proposed bill would allow ski resorts to build more summer attractions

Environmentalists worry summer facilities at ski resorts could get out of hand after recent legislative proposal

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LAKE TAHOE — Imagine taking a ski lift to the summit of one of Lake Tahoe's many resorts, hopping on a roller coaster pointed straight downhill, then screaming down the mountain faster than you ever could on the snow ... not in Tahoe, right?

Well, under new legislation being proposed, summertime attractions such as "alpine coasters" could become a big part of ski resorts' operations in the future.

On Monday, Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., introduced a bill that would allow ski areas to offer year-round recreation on land they lease from the U.S. Forest Service, giving resorts the ability to expand on the use of winter facilities during summer months and construct new facilities specifically for summer recreation.

The bill, which applies to ski areas permitted on forest service land, aims at promoting year-round opportunities like biking, concerts, and other recreational activities that are consistent with mountain environments and amenities, Udall said in a statement release Monday. "As our economy is still struggling, we need to make it clear that these year-round opportunities are welcome and available to help promote jobs, stimulate local economies and provide educational and recreational activities for families," he added.

Economy aside, environmentalists are worried the bill could lead ski resorts to build monstrous summertime recreation facilities like the alpine coasters or dry tubing parks — think luge tracks made of a slick carpet — popular in Europe and some U.S. resorts.

"We have some concern with this legislation that it isn't really clear what kinds of facilities can be built," said Ryan Demmy Bidwell, executive director of Colorado Wild, an environmental group in Durango, Colo. that helps issue the environmental report cards that grade U.S. ski resorts every year. "It leaves the doors open to any outdoor recreation facility, and building an amusement park wouldn't be consistent with the recourses of the forest service."

Some 125 ski areas nationwide operate in part on federal land under a 1986 law that expressly permits skiing and ski-related recreation, according to the Associate Press. Here in Tahoe, many resorts fall under that category.

Alpine Meadows and Sugar Bowl Ski Resort operate largely on U.S Forest Service land, and approximately 20 percent of Boreal Mountain Resort is federal land, according to Hank Hennessey, snow ranger and permit administrator for the Truckee Ranger District of the Tahoe National Forest.

Most activities would avoid roller coasters and water parks, however, and typical summer operations like hiking and mountain biking, which most resorts can accommodate with the use of facilities built for winter recreation, like chair lifts and lodges, are of little environmental concern.

“That’s why we’re comfortable with allowing summer operations and some construction,” Bidwell said. “It just needs to be clear what we’re talking about.”

According to Hennessey, many of the resorts work with a very “skeletal” crew during the summer months, focusing on maintenance more than recreation. And when resorts do request summer operations, a summer operating plan must be approved by the forest service.

“Right around now the resorts will submit proposals and then we go out to specialists to get their input to see what the impact of those operations would be,” Hennessey said.

And even if the bill is passed and Tahoe resorts start seeking more recreational summer operations, Hennessey said in such a politically outspoken area, as Tahoe is, he’s sure they would hear from the environmental groups.

Patricia Hickson, land use associate for the Sierra Nevada Alliance, agreed there would be a need for some dialogue between resort officials and the public if any summer facilities were to be proposed.

“We would oppose any piece of legislation that would allow a resort to dramatically impact the forest service ecosystem, and if it did go through, we would want to see the opportunity for a lot of public comment and oversight for any potential change,” she said.

The issue arose last year when the ski industry approached Udall for the legislative change after Vail Mountain Resort ran up against the current law following a proposal to build an alpine coaster on federal land the ski area leases.