

New report ranks safety conditions at Sierra ski resorts

By Jeff DeLong • jdelong@rgj.com • January 18, 2011

Safety standards at Sierra ski resorts are inconsistent and skiers and snowboarders should take note of the situation at their favorite resorts, a report released Tuesday by a nonprofit group suggests.

The California Mountain Resort Safety Report, prepared by the SnowSport Safety Foundation, found mixed results when it surveyed safety conditions at 25 different resorts.

Representatives of the California Ski Industry Association said safety remains a high priority for a sport with inherent risks. They said the report is likely linked to recent efforts to enact safety regulations at ski resorts by the father of a woman killed in a snowboarding accident in 2006, a position denied by the report's lead author.

Dick Penniman, chief research officer for the SnowSport Safety Foundation, said the report is only meant as an information resource and that his group is not pushing for new laws or regulations at California ski resorts.

"Certain things can cause serious injuries at resorts," said Penniman, a former ski patrol supervisor at Sugar Bowl and Alpine Meadows. "Some resorts are doing things to address them and some are not."

Resorts were surveyed anonymously last winter. The report gives them a numerical grade on safety measures to avoid impacts with structures such as lift towers and snowmaking equipment and on efforts to address hazards on the slopes through trail design and maintenance.

"We're giving people as much information as we can on what to look for," Penniman said.

"I think a lot of people don't see this stuff. They're there for a good time."

Bob Roberts, executive director of the California Ski Industry Association, defended the industry's

emphasis on safety. "The bottom line is we have fairly vigorous safety standards," Roberts said. "There are inherent risks."

Roberts said he and resort operators are now reading Penniman's report and could not comment in detail. He did say it is likely associated with efforts by Dan Gregorie, whose 24-year-old daughter Jessica was killed in a snowboarding accident at Alpine Meadows in 2006, to establish ski safety regulations.

A bill backed by Gregorie mandating new safety standards at ski resorts was vetoed by Republican former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last October. The bill would have placed unnecessary burdens on resorts, Schwarzenegger said at the time.

"We knew he would be coming back," Roberts said of Gregorie. Penniman said the safety survey was his idea and that Gregorie played no role in its planning and preparation. "There is no direct connection," Penniman said. "Dr. Gregorie did not take part in any way."