



As chill sets in, ski resorts get ready to open

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Mother Nature's refusal to whip up December snow so far this year doesn't mean a thing to the state's ski resorts.

Campgaw in Bergen County and Mountain Creek and Hidden Valley up in Sussex all fired up their snow-makers yesterday thanks to a cold snap that brought New Jersey its chilliest temperatures since March.

The three resorts plan to open their doors Saturday to skiers and snowboarders as long as the weather holds.

"We have good snow-making temperatures through the rest of the week," said Kendall Kless of Hidden Valley Ski Resort in Vernon. "Some days look better than others, but we're going to give it our best shot."

Temperatures began to dip yesterday, with daytime lows around the freezing mark and night lows hitting the teens, said National Weather Service Meteorologist Patrick O'Hara.

The turn was a sharp contrast to the moderate and rainy days of late fall, and forecasters say the mild autumn shouldn't lead anyone to believe we're headed for an easy winter.

"The real stuff is coming," O'Hara said.

And when winter officially starts next Tuesday, it probably won't be the kinder, gentler version.

Meteorologists said the state can expect colder-than-normal temperatures and an average snowfall this year, and some believe snowfalls over the next decade will be heavier than normal.

Michael Schlacter of Weather 2000, a commercial forecast service based in New York City, said that over the past 100 years, 20-to- 30-year periods have been marked with heavy snowfall based on the roller-coaster circulation patterns of the ocean and atmosphere. So this winter may remind people of the snowy 1950s and 1960s, Schlacter said.

The snow is a good sign for the winter sports industry, which started early the past two years because of early December snowfalls.

"We're off to a bit of a slow start," said National Ski Areas Association President Michael Berry. "If we knew what the weather was going to be like every year, our lives would be much simpler."

To usher in the season, both Mountain Creek and Hidden Valley bought new snow guns to churn out the powder, providing skiers and snowboarders with fresher snow in larger quantities. Both resorts also made improvements to the rails in their terrain parks.

Mountain Creek has a "superpipe," an Olympic-sized half-pipe that stretches 425 feet with walls that reach 18 feet, said Shannon McSweeney, communications manager at the resort.

Hidden Valley added metal rails of various shapes -- such as the "rainbow rail" and "battleship kink" -- for snowboarders in its terrain park, Kless said.

Ski resorts in the region are hoping to bolster the number of skiers and boarders, even as the number of resorts in the country decline. In the 1984-85 ski season, there were 727 ski areas operating, compared with 494 last season, according to the National Ski Areas Association. But visits to ski resorts are up from 10 years ago.

The industry can hang its hat on the rise of snowboarding, Berry said. The participation of snowboarders has more than quadrupled nationwide since 1992, bringing 4.7 million more riders to ski areas.

"What we're seeing is tremendous enthusiasm on the part of young people coming to the sport as snowboarders," Berry said. "We think we're going to have a banner year."

Jan Dabal, a snowboarder who owns Board Center in Vernon, said she's ready for this season. She has grinded the base of her board to get rid of the old scars, sharpened the edges, texturized it with hot wax and checked the screws and bindings.

Beginners, she said, should try it. Just get their balance and go for it.

"Just enjoy the free riding," Dabal said.

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