

For ski resorts in Western US, too much snow is a good woe

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Snow Safety Patroller Ryan Evanczyk stands on the mountainside at Arapahoe Basin ski area, where he works, Thursday, Jan. 12, 2017, in Arapahoe, Colo. Evanczyk has had his hands full lately performing avalanche mitigation, given the large amount of recent snowfall. (AP Photo/P. Solomon Banda)

For ski resorts in Colorado and the Sierra Nevada, it's a good problem to have: too much snow.

Recent storms walloping mountains across the West dropped up to 10 feet of snow, creating thrilling powdery runs. But once avalanche danger emerged on roads and at the slopes, several resorts made the unusual move of shutting down.

While the closures cost resorts income from lift tickets, the businesses will likely make it up in the long run by promoting the fresh snow on Twitter and getting more people excited to come up and carve powder turns.

"It's like you just go out and get barreled, you drop in and come up, an' pah! Drop back down. Powder everywhere in your face, you know? ... Mashed potato powder," said John Lencki, a New Hampshire native skiing Thursday at Arapahoe Basin Ski Area.

It's a change from previous years beleaguered by drought. Even this season, the Colorado snowpack got off to its worst start in more than 30 years, forcing some ski areas to push back opening day this fall.

Some resorts dug out in time for the holiday weekend, though the forecast in Colorado calls for more snow Friday and Sunday.

Here's a look at the problems—and joy—a thick blanket of snow can bring to ski resorts in the West:

HOW OFTEN DO RESORTS CLOSE BECAUSE OF TOO MUCH SNOW?

Heavy snow typically does not affect resort operations, but it often creates problems on the roads leading to the slopes, said Chris Linsmayer, a spokesman for Colorado Ski Country USA, an industry

group representing more than 20 resorts.

"It's extremely rare (for snow to close a resort). I've been skiing my whole life and it's never happened to me," he said.

It's hard to say how often resorts close because of [heavy snow](#), but most agree it's unusual.

Dan Lavelly, who has lived in the Lake Tahoe area for decades, was looking forward to heading to the Mount Rose ski resort southwest of Reno. More than 10 feet of snow fell in about a week at some area resorts.

"In all my years, it's so rare to have too much snow," Lavelly said Wednesday. "Having a season pass—you pretty much live for these conditions. You want 2 or 3 feet of fresh powder, and you want to go play in it."

Wintry conditions close resorts in the Sierra Nevada, the mountains spanning California and Nevada, more often than those in Colorado because they get massive amounts of snow all at once, said Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association.

WHY WERE THE RESORTS IN COLORADO CLOSED?

Avalanches pose problems, more so on roads than at the resorts. Ski patrollers use explosives to mitigate slides every day and close portions of resorts that are at risk.



A vehicle passes snow plowed high along US-6 near Loveland Pass, Colo, Thursday, Jan. 12, 2017. Avalanche danger has forced a handful of resorts in Colorado and the Sierra Nevada to close, disappointing skiers but giving the industry a golden opportunity to publicize a nice problem to have - too much snow. Some resorts have since reopened after digging out just in time for the long Martin Luther King holiday weekend. (AP Photo/P. Solomon Banda)

"We have closures and we have ropes. We have gates, and we really try to steer people to specific areas of the hill to keep them out of avalanche terrain," said Ryan Evanczyk, a ski patroller at Arapahoe Basin.

But "the big message here is not necessarily the mountain is unsafe, but the roads to get to and from the mountain were unsafe," Linsmayer said.

Despite the closures, the snow led to bragging rights.

Crested Butte Mountain Resort in western Colorado shut down its lifts late Monday out of concern for guests and employees because of high winds and heavy, wet snow. Officials tweeted a photo of it piled high at a measuring station with the line, "We officially #buriedthebutte."

"It has definitely helped our publicity, this week for sure," spokeswoman Erica Mueller said.

Monarch Mountain ski area closed for a day this week because of work to control avalanches on a nearby mountain pass, tweeting a photo of powder stacked next to its sign with the hashtag #toomuchsnow. And after Arapahoe Basin closed because of slide danger on another highway, it simply posted, "Snow, Snow, Snow."

In the Sierra Nevada, road closures and the threat of avalanches closed resorts around Lake Tahoe closed for several days this week. Some reopened Thursday.

HOW MUCH SNOW HAS FALLEN?

The three Colorado resorts that closed received 3 to 5 feet over the previous few days.

In the Sierra Nevada, storms dumped the most snow the mountains have seen in six years, the National Weather Service in Reno said. It helped ease the effects of California's lingering drought, with federal monitors saying Thursday that more than 40 percent of California is out of drought.

WHY IS COLORADO SEEING EXTREME AVALANCHE DANGER?

"The simple answer is we've gotten a lot of snow in a short amount of time," said Ethan Greene, director of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

He compared the snowpack to the construction of a building. If you build one story at a time, the foundation has a chance to adjust to the added weight.

"But if you plunk down a 20-story building in a couple of minutes, it's likely to break," he said. "When you have this amount of [snow](#) in a couple of days, it piles up really fast and the snowpack has a hard time adjusting to the new load.

"With that rapid loading—a lot of weight in a short amount of time—it becomes unstable," Greene said.

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