

California drought sends skiers to Idaho, Washington

By MARTHA BELLISLE, Associated Press



In this photo taken Friday, Jan. 23, 2015, Alana Wilson, 5, skis on a Methow Valley community cross country trail in Winthrop, Wash. Warm temperatures and drought conditions in the West has changed the migratory patterns of birds and wildlife, but it also has impacted another group of animals: skiers, especially cross country skiers. A lack of snow so far this winter season has caused some cross country centers to close down until more snow arrives, prompting many avid skiers to hit the road. Benefiting from this skier migration is Sun Valley, Idaho, and Methow Valley, Washington. (AP Photo/Martha Bellisle)

In this photo taken Friday, Jan. 23, 2015, James DeSalvo, executive director of Methow Trails, poses for a photo at the organization's office in Winthrop, Wash., in the Methow Valley. Warm temperatures and drought conditions in the West has changed the migratory patterns of birds and wildlife, but it also has impacted another group of animals: skiers, especially cross country skiers. A lack of snow so far this winter season has caused some cross country centers to close down until more snow arrives, prompting many avid skiers to hit the road. Benefiting from this skier migration is Sun Valley, Idaho, and Methow Valley, Washington. (AP Photo/Martha Bellisle)



WINTHROP, Wash. >> Warm temperatures and drought conditions in the West have changed the migratory patterns of birds and wildlife, but are also impacting another

group: skiers, especially cross country skiers.

Some Alpine resorts - which offer downhill skiing — are responding to tough conditions by making snow. But for Nordic centers — known for miles of trails groomed with special tracks for diagonal striding or perfectly flat tracks for skate skiing -snow-making isn't an option.

Faced with a lack of snow, some cross country centers have closed until more snow arrives, prompting skiers to hit the road.

The Nordic skier migration has proved beneficial to Sun Valley, Idaho, and Methow Valley, Washington, just east of the Cascade Mountains in central Washington.

“We are very disappointed to not have skiing at home yet again,” said June Lane, a Truckee, California, resident who lives across the street from Tahoe Donner Cross Country Ski Center but recently bought a town house near Sun Valley. “We bought passes at TD and I have not skied there once. We have been here since the day before Thanksgiving and the skiing has been fantastic.”

The Tahoe Donner center opened Dec. 20 but closed Jan. 19 until more snow arrives. Tahoe Cross Country Center in Tahoe City, California, posted on its website: “Trails are currently closed due to insufficient snow coverage.” Ski centers in Alaska and other parts of the West also are struggling. Eaglecrest Ski Resort in Juneau, Alaska, closed on Jan. 19.

But the cross country trail system in the Methow Valley is on track to have a record in terms of ski season length. James DeSalvo, executive director of Methow Trails, said they started grooming - setting ski tracks - the week before Thanksgiving, and he expects skiing to continue in April.

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Meanwhile, at the Central Sierra Snow Laboratory, a research station run by the University of California, Berkeley, technicians are tracking the drought.

Randall Osterhuber, a snow scientist at the lab in Soda Springs, California, said December was a wet month for the northern Sierra near Lake Tahoe - home to about a dozen Alpine and cross country ski resorts. But the snow levels were high, leaving terrain below 7,000 feet without snow, only rain.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor website, “short-term deficits continued growing in the Sierra Nevada and adjacent Nevada, and intensely dry conditions persisted.”

For avid cross country skiers, the only choice has been to go elsewhere.

Yolanda Labia, a Truckee resident who also bought property near Sun Valley, said they're staying for now.

“We visit regardless of conditions in Tahoe, but this year is a special treat,” she said.

Lane said she knows others from Truckee who bought places in Sun Valley, and many friends are driving up to ski.

“There is a new term for here now, ‘The Galena Triangle,’ as the Galena/Wood River Valley always seems to have snow, even in drier years,” she said. “Skiing here is a dream come true. It is rather ironic that we now have to drive to (go) skiing.”

The skiers are heading to Washington state, too.

Skiers from Oregon, Montana, Alaska, California, and British Columbia flocked to Methow Valley last weekend for a series of 30-kilometer races. Out-of-town skiers are driving in for weekday skiing as well, said Danica Ready, a program manager at Methow Trails.

“We’ve been very lucky here, as the conditions are great,” she said. “It is helping after a brutal summer of dealing with the largest fire in Washington state history in our valley.”

Two fires in July and August not only destroyed homes, but also damaged or killed some businesses, said Diane Childs, co-owner of Winthrop Mountain Sports, an outdoors clothing, equipment and ski shop.

The fires knocked out power, closed the main highway and kept visitors away, she said. “But now we’re one of the only places in the state with snow,” Childs said. “People are coming in from all over.”

The cross country skiing in Methow Valley covers 120 miles. Methow Trails, a nonprofit organization, has partnered with landowners to create a web of ski trails that snake along the valley floor, sneak up into the hills and climb up to high points.

The area has produced a long list of Olympic cross country skiers. The sibling team of Erik and Sadie Bjornsen and Brian Gregg, all competed at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

“The skier numbers are increasing here this year, even though the industry numbers are dropping,” DeSalvo said.

When the snow failed to fall during the Christmas holiday on many of the downhill ski resorts, a slew of Alpine skiers traveled to Methow, he said.

“There was no snow anywhere, but they still wanted a winter experience,” he said. “Every year we see the migration of people who find us.”