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Group aims to expose dangers on the slopes

By Steve Geissinger / MediaNews

A legislator and a grieving Bay Area father jointly announced formation this week of a private group to address what they called the government's failure to oversee unmarked dangers on ski slopes.

Jessica Gregorie, 24, of San Francisco, died Feb. 5, 2006, when she fell down an icy, 200-foot precipice along Beaver Traverse at the Alpine Meadows Ski Resort, near Lake Tahoe. Gregorie, carrying her snowboard, tumbled into the Granite Chief Wilderness area of the Tahoe National Forest.

There were - and still aren't - any significant warnings or safety equipment such as ropes in the area, according to Jessica's father, Dan Gregorie.

Gregorie, a Bay Area physician, and Assemblyman Dave Jones, a Sacramento Democrat, said during a Capitol news conference that they were launching the California Ski and Snowboard Safety Organization, in memory of Jessica.

"The vast majority of the public is poorly informed about serious risks facing customers and staff at California ski resorts," Gregorie said. "We plan to work with everyone involved to improve safety for winter sports enthusiasts and hopefully reduce the number of tragedies."

Authorities noted that California, unlike many states, has no skiing safety statutes and the ski industry has no uniform safety code. The new group will lobby for legislation and work with the ski industry to try and establish uniform safety standards, policies and procedures.

Kate McGuire, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Industrial Relations, said her department comes the closest to a regulatory agency, but by law is only concerned with matters such as tram operation that affect the safety of ski-resort employees.

A spokeswoman for Alpine Meadows Ski Resort, which has changed ownership since the accident, did not respond to telephone messages seeking comment.

Jones, who called for preventive measures, is not the first lawmaker to express interest in the problem. Legislators have studied the situation before without passing significant measures.

Gregorie said "the California ski industry enjoys unusually strong liability protections through a common-law doctrine of 'assumed risk,' as well as contractual-negligence waivers included on ski-pass purchase agreements.

"Often the skier or boarder is not aware of the unknown risks they are supposedly assuming."

Precautions, such as helmets, are becoming more common, however, as skiers begin to realize the dangers.

On average, over the past decade, about 37 people have died annually skiing or snowboarding across the nation, according to the National Ski Areas Association, an industry group.

During the 2006-07 season, 22 died skiing or snowboarding and another 40 sustained serious injuries resulting in life-long disabilities.

Among the two fatalities were Michael Kennedy - son of former U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy - who died in a skiing accident in Aspen, Colo. in 1998. A few days later, Rep. Sonny Bono, of "Sonny and Cher" fame, died of injuries while skiing on the Nevada side of the Heavenly Ski Resort near South Lake Tahoe.