



California lacks uniform ski safety regulations

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For 20 years, Nevada has had a law designed to set a safety standard for skiers and ski resorts.

Now, a father who lost his daughter in a tragic accident at a Sierra resort has teamed with a California lawmaker to see what changes are needed in that state.

"We want to make this as safe a recreation activity as possible," said California Assemblyman Dave Jones, who recently joined Dan Gregorie in announcing formation of the California Ski and Snowboard Safety Organization.

Among the group's issues is California's lack of a ski safety statute, a law of the type in place in Colorado, Utah, Vermont and other major skiing states.

The Nevada Legislature approved one back in 1987 and amended it in 2005 to incorporate the sport of snowboarding, which was skyrocketing in popularity.

"We thought it would be good to have a standard set to which all would be held," said state Sen. Randolph Townsend, R-Reno. He was in the Legislature when the skier safety law was enacted and sponsored the 2005 amendment.

The law specifies what skiers and snowboarders shouldn't do: ski out of bounds, ski intoxicated and drop objects from ski lifts, for example.

It also dictates actions expected of ski resorts -- designating places where safety signs should be displayed in "simple and concise language," among other things.

"There should be that joint approach," Townsend said. "This is not about making one party responsible. Everybody's responsible."

The California Ski Industry Association has attempted in past years to pass a skier safety law in that state's Legislature, mostly recently in 1985, said Bob Roberts, the group's executive director. The only law passed, though, was one that prohibited skiing in closed areas.

Roberts said he isn't sure a broader law is really necessary, largely because 18 of California's 23 resorts are on U.S. Forest Service land. The federal government must approve safety plans for each resort every year, he said.

"The bottom line is the Forest Service is the active oversight for all the resorts," Roberts said.

Townsend said he is surprised California doesn't have a law like Nevada's.

"To be honest with you, yes, it does surprise me," Townsend said. "Traditionally, they've been much more active with regard to the states' role with people's activities."

Nevada has far fewer ski resorts and skiers as well, he said.

"They have 10 to 20 times the number of skiers we have. You'd think they would be on top of this," Townsend said.

Jones, the Sacramento Democrat who chairs the California Assembly's Judiciary Committee, said he too was surprised when he first learned his state lacked a skier safety statute.

"My guess is many other Californians and members of the Legislature would be surprised as well," Jones said.

Jones, who said he was moved to join Gregorie's efforts after hearing of his daughter's death, doesn't have specific legislative proposals. What the organization hopes to accomplish could probably be done voluntarily, he said.

"It remains to be seen what exactly the correct approach is," Jones said. "We're interested in reaching out to the industry, have a dialogue and look at what other states have done."

Roberts said the industry is open to coming discussions.

"We're always going to listen to somebody who believes they have approaches that can be positive," Roberts said.