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A ski patroller keeps an eye on one of Heavenly Mountain Resort's many runs. The resort has launched a new safety program called "Play It Safe."

Heavenly kicks off new safety campaign

BY DYLAN SILVER
DSILVER@TAHOEDAILYTRIBUNE.COM

With National Safety Awareness Week kicking off next weekend, Heavenly Mountain Resort, along with all of Vail Resorts, is launching a new safety program.

"Safety of both our employees and our guests is incredibly important to us," said general manager Pete Sonntag during a meeting with local press in December.

By focusing on safety education and enforcement, mountain management hope they can improve the guest experience. Some features of the new campaign, called "Play It Safe," will be obvious on the mountain while others are more subtle.

Safety training starts in Heavenly's ski school. All children in ski schools are obligated to wear helmets. Instructors inform students of etiquette and how to ski and ride in varying conditions in a controlled manner. And new turnout zones allow for classes to



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A skier slides into a slow zone at Heavenly Mountain Resort Wednesday. Resort management has increased signage at the resort as part of its new safety campaign, "Play It Safe."

meet safely off the trail.

"The entire mantra for ski school is 'safety, fun and learning,'" said Michael Allen, director of skier services. "It's almost as if we're weaving in the skiers responsibility

code from start to finish."

On the slopes, increased signage will clearly designate slow areas and areas that are dedicated to ski school. Etiquette signs will remind skiers and snowboarders how to ski or ride responsibly. The "violation sign" shows how many passes have been pulled — as of last week 54 days and one pass had been revoked. For first-time offenders, a safety class can be taken to regain access to the mountain.

"There's certain areas of the mountain where we don't compromise," said Brian Gannon, ski patrol director. "We've clearly marked them as slow skiing zones and there's no room for interpretation."

Heavenly has also jacked up the number of mountain safety personnel and the amount of training that those employees receive, including training to deal with diffi-

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cult or combative people. Heavenly officials will not comment on staffing levels and did not say exactly how many mountain safety staffers they have. Sonntag did say senior management will be jumping into the mountain safety position from time to time.

"Basically all of our senior managers have spent multiple days this week out," Sonntag said. "We're actively participating in this process. That's a key component."

The launch of "Play It Safe" was not a response to the lawsuit filed recently against Heavenly by Kimberly Bland who was injured on the mountain when an employee crashed into her and its timing is "purely coincidental," Heavenly spokesman Russ Pecoraro said.

"We've been working on this since last spring," Pecoraro said.

Does bigger mean safer?

"Play It Safe" was developed between all Vail Resorts. The six mountains bounce safety issues off one another and their various departments work together regularly to discuss best practices and fix problems.

"We really are united around this effort and feel it's critically important for us to lead," Sonntag said.

The policy that employees must wear helmets, now in its third year, is one of the best examples of the company's initiative and its culture of safety, Sonntag said. No other resorts in the Lake Tahoe Basin require their on-mountain employees to wear helmets.

"There's a big expense involved with that," Sonntag

said. "We equip each one of our employees with a helmet and require its use."

The signage Heavenly now uses was pulled from Keystone Ski Resort. And individual departments like ski school and terrain parks at all the resorts have shared countless tips, safety information and best practices with each other via weekly conference calls.

Are laws needed?

Heavenly has a history of opposing laws that require ski resorts to enforce safety measures and instead opts to voluntarily introduce their own safety programs.

"I would say we're not going to rely on things becoming law to do what we feel is the right thing to do," Sonntag said.

The resort did not support California helmet bills proposed in 2010 and 2011, though the National Ski Areas Association did. The 2010 bill was vetoed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. And the 2011 bill was vetoed by Gov. Jerry Brown.

The problem with laws and rules like requiring chairlift users to lower the difficulty bar is that they're difficult to enforce, Pecoraro said.

"One of those things that you deal with when you try to make something like that mandatory, just like when you try to make helmets for everybody mandatory, is how do you enforce it, who enforces it," Pecoraro said.

Ski resorts are not required to report injuries or safety statistics. Heavenly gauges its safety by guest surveys and the number of passes pulled or hotlisted.

"The thing about this program is it's based on customer feedback and we're constantly trying to refine it," Pecoraro said.