

Big Guns and Endless Ammo Means Snow, El Nino or No

Not every winter is an epic El Nino season like two years ago, when the Big Bear resorts received double their average natural snowfall. Or for that matter a La Nina with Arctic oscillation like last season, when the resorts received almost as much as the El Nino year.

Which is why Snow Summit and Bear Mountain again spent over a half-million dollars for snowmaking and related improvements during summer, augmenting what are already the best systems in Southern California. Much of that money went to purchasing ten more new SMI Super Wizzard fan snowguns at nearly \$40,000 each.

Between them the Big Bear Resorts now have about 150 of the state-of-the-art snowmaking guns to ensure there's nightly blizzards in Big Bear even if it never rains a drop at your house. Indeed some of the best blizzards fall when it's hot and dry in Great Basin.

That's because the dry Santa Ana winds that bring heat to the cities actually start out cold in the mountains, and combined with low humidity, result in excellent snowmaking conditions. It's not unusual for the Big Bear resorts to blast tons

of beautiful white snow around-the-clock for a week straight or even longer, so if the palm trees are swaying, it's likely the fan guns are spraying.

With so much snowmaking firepower, both Snow Summit and Bear Mountain can indulge themselves to blow open extras like halfpipes—including Southern California's only competition-quality Superpipe at Bear—enormous glacier-sized jumps, rollers, boardercross track, you name it. Bear Mountain will even make snow *off the runs* as well as on to allow for tree skiing and a little piste action.

Really though, it's not the guns that set the Big Bear resorts apart from the competition, but the ammo. Both Snow Summit and Bear Mountain have a virtually endless water supply in Big Bear Lake, drawing hundreds of millions of gallons for snowmaking, while freeway resorts must rely on limited supplies of reservoir and well water.

During optimum conditions each resort can take 6,000 gallons of water per minute and convert it into snow—combined that's an incredible 12,000-13,000 gpm. In a typical year each resort might convert up to 500

acres feet of lake water into snow...that's nearly 163 million gallons! No other local resort comes close to that, which explains why the Big Bear resorts consistently have way more runs open, with better snow, than other local resorts during dry years.



"We've got the water and the infrastructure to get snow down," notes Chris Riddle of Big Bear Mountain Resorts. "Used to be 1,500 gpm was considered good. Now if we're not doing 3,000 we almost wonder if it's worth it. Of course we'll make snow at 1,000 gpm if we really need it but more often than not, we're looking at high volume hours and getting the most out of it."

Snowmaking by itself is a relatively simple process. When the air is dry

enough and temperatures are cold enough, nozzles and fan guns mix water with compressed, atomized air that, when blasted into the air, falls as beautiful, white snow. Nothing added, nothing fake about it—100% real snow.

The complicated part is coming up with the energy, and to a lesser extent the water, to do so, particularly on a resort-wide basis. It's one thing to fuel up and provide power and water for a few guns—even smaller places do that—and quite another to run a hundred or more simultaneously, around-the-clock, for days on end, like Snow Summit and Bear Mountain do during gusty Santa Ana wind periods when temperatures and humidity are low.

That's why Snow Summit generates its own power, producing 10 megawatts. Lifts and lights drain about 15% of that, so less juice is available to run the air compressors for the hydrant guns during the day than at night, when as little power as possible is used around the resort so that up to 95% can go to snowmaking. In general the better conditions are, the less resources—water, power and air—are needed, which means more guns can be fired. ■

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