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Ski areas have wish list for Obama

High on their desires are stimulating the economy and addressing climate change.

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Colorado's ski industry is greeting President-elect Barack Obama and the Democratic sweep of Congress with its trademark optimism.

And a list.

Highest on the \$4 billion-a-year industry's wish list from a unified Democratic president and Congress:

- Stimulate the economy and get people vacationing.
- Reform immigration and consider upping the number of temporary worker, or H-2B, visas that are the lifeline for resorts seeking seasonal employees.
- Increase Forest Service funding or at least separate firefighting funds from operation budgets.
- Address climate change by increasing tax credits for businesses that pursue environmentally friendly programs.

"Obviously this administration has a lot on its plate," said Melanie Mills, president of Colorado Ski Country USA, the marketing and policy group responsible for peddling Colorado skiing as a whole. "We don't want recreation to be left behind."

Public-lands policy did not play much of a role in this year's presidential campaign, as more pressing issues took the spotlight. Obama's approach to public lands and his plans for the Forest Service are uncertain. The first sign of direction will be his appointment of the undersecretary for natural resources and environment, the position in the U.S. Department of Agriculture responsible for Forest Service policies and operations.

"We are waiting with bated breath to see who is appointed," said Geraldine Link, head of public policy for the 134-resort National Ski Areas Association in Lakewood.

As for the top of the list, the No. 1 priority depends a lot on who's wishing.

"I think climate change is much more important than anything right now," said Chris Diamond, head of the Steamboat resort. "I'm hoping the new president takes the 30,000-foot view. I mean climate change, we have got to fix this or we are all done."

In that vein, 70 ski resorts across the nation are lobbying Congress for mandatory caps on carbon-dioxide emissions, hoping to decrease the amount of greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.

"A lot of people in the industry are very concerned about climate change and something will actually be done about it in this Congress," Link said. "That's the big one."

Economic relief ranks up there too. Already the signs of tough economic times are hitting the ski industry, with declining early bookings. Severe drops in retail spending could translate into dips in vacations. And the ski industry needs vacationers.

"I see the No. 1 benefit of this election as one-party control," said Vail Resorts chief executive Rob Katz. "We can take actions that get people feeling more confident and stable in the economy."

But then immigration reform is also a fix-it-now type of problem that has simmered on the back burner. A year ago, Congress failed to renew the country's H-2B visa program, effectively nixing Australian, New Zealand and South American workers who flock to resorts each winter.

"Small businesses and ski resorts across America have been let down by Congress in the last year and we need swift and lasting action on this," Link said.

Even those on the losing side of November's election are hoping.

They're just hoping the new regime plays nice.

"Tax me fairly but don't regulate the hell out of me and stymie me in other ways so that I can't do business," said Tim Mueller, owner of Crested Butte Mountain Resort and Okemo ski area in Vermont, and operator of New Hampshire's Sunapee.

"The ski business is generally considered a clean business and environmentally friendly, and our country needs recreation. Don't hamstring us with extraordinarily restrictive Forest Service requirements and other environmental policies that are anti-business and anti-ski-area growth."

But rolling back some business-friendly public-land policy proposed by President Bush is high on the Obama administration's agenda. Bush's recent moves to relax environmental regulations — specifically a rollback of protections for endangered species — have been targeted for reversal by Obama's team.

Any ski-industry uncertainty about Obama is assuaged by Mark Udall's winning a seat in the Senate.

Udall, a Democrat from Eldorado Springs, has long advocated for the Colorado ski industry. This summer Udall scripted a bill that would tweak the country's 1986 ski-area-permitting law to give ski areas on public lands more latitude in offering year-round play. Udall's bill, which never passed through committee, would have given the Forest Service more room when it comes to approving activities such as tubing, snow biking, mountain biking and hiking.

Udall spokeswoman Tara Trujillo said that while her boss has yet to finalize plans for his role as senator, he likely will reintroduce his bill in the next Congress.

"I think you will see him continuing to support the economies of small towns in the mountains," Trujillo said. "If you can draw more tourists and visitors up to the smaller mountain communities, it strengthens not just their economies but the entire state's economy."

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