Cold blast lets WNC ski areas open

All six finally ready to go as season gets off to early start

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SAPPHIRE - If anyone is loving the frigid temperatures that have gripped Western North Carolina this past week, it's mountain ski areas.

With the opening of Sapphire Valley Ski Area on Dec. 17, all six mountain ski areas will finally be open for the season.

The cold blast, along with a more than $1 million capital investment in ski area upgrades, has helped Sapphire Ski Area, in Jackson County, actually open earlier than usual.

"This is the first time since 2013 that we will be open for the Christmas holiday," said Jim King, the ski area's marketing director. "Everybody's excited. Last year people came up here and they weren't able to ski for the holidays. We have a lot of excited guests this year."

The blast of cold weather dropping temperatures below freezing allowed the ski area to start making snow last weekend. But the real boost was the new, state-of-the-art piping, pumps and snow guns, King said.

"We haven't changed our pipes since 1964 when the ski area opened. We took out all the old piping that was corroded, and put in new high-tech pipes from Switzerland. They're like Lego blocks. Now, if you have to repair a section, instead of having to weld, you just pull out a 20-foot section and put a new one in."

The upgrades include 4,100 feet of new piping, 15 HKD halo guns, and a new pump that can blow 650 pounds per square inch of snow, up from the 100 psi of the last pump.

"Now we have a lot more water going up to the ski guns, which generate a heck of a lot more snow," he said.

The entire snowmaking system is now fully automatic and controlled by computer. Technicians no longer have to watch the Weather Channel and hand calculate temperature, wind and humidity to know when to start up the guns, King said. Computers analyze the conditions and turn the guns on and off automatically when weather conditions are appropriate.

Sapphire Valley will also open its Frozen Falls Tube World Dec. 17.

While the other five ski areas have been open, most plan to open their snow tubing runs this weekend. Cataloochee Ski Area in Maggie Valley, which opened Nov. 21, will open its Tony's Tube World Dec. 17. The tube run is 4 miles down the road from the ski area.

Beech Mountain Resort in Avery County and Wolf Ridge Ski Area in Madison County will also open their tube runs Dec. 17.

All areas will be open through the Christmas and New Year holidays.



COURTESY SAPPHIRE VALLEY SKI AREA

A skier heads down a run with cabins in the background at Sapphire Valley Ski Area. The ski slopes will open today.