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Willamette Pass slopes on

Despite little snow,
new owner plans
ski area's future

Last year's season-long closure of the Willamette Pass Ski Area caused nary a tear for Eugene skiers.

Despite being the ski area closest to Eugene, Willamette Pass, with no chairlifts, shrinks in the shadow of Mt. Bachelor with its eight chairs and 1,800 vertical feet.

Willamette Pass has two surface lifts — a poma and a rope — serving a hill of 700 vertical feet.

Willamette Pass also had the reputation of being a poorly run operation. The area was closed, it was said, because the then-owner could not make payments. When the snow began to fall, no one seemed interested in purchasing the area, located just 1½ hours southeast of Eugene.

So, while the other Oregon ski areas enjoyed a good season, Willamette Pass lay silent.

But that was last year.

This year, the lifts once again are hauling skiers up the hill.

New owner Richard Satagaj says the problems that plagued the area should all be in the past. But after being closed a year, opening again took more than just redecorating.

Satagaj says he spent the first four months at his new area just getting things in operating condition.

"I cleared the hills of trees and that sort of thing. Saplings that were growing for four or five years were starting to get pretty strong.

"We had to get all the lifts running, had to get the wells and sewage system set — they were all screwed up — and electrical wiring."

Satagaj also rebuilt the lifts, getting parts where he could find them. Mt. Bachelor provided him with some parts from their old poma lift.

But even as Satagaj began clearing the way for a hoped-for avalanche of skiers, another problem developed.

No snow.

This year, the entire western portion of the United States is suffering from the worst lack of snow since the 1976-77 season.

While some of the higher-elevation resorts such as Mt. Bachelor and Timberline are able to operate marginally, Willamette Pass, with a base elevation of about 5,000 feet, has been forced to shut down.

For the new owner, nothing could have been more frustrating. Before he bought the area, he had heard snow stories that painted a picture brighter than sunlight reflecting off a mogul.

"We had a lot of people tell about the amount of snow that happened in the Cascades and at Willamette Pass, and, of course, when we bought the place we did research, he says. "We saw all

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Melting away

A slushy season for local ski shops
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