

Greening a Ski & Snowboard Resort



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1. Overview

Stevens Pass Winter Resort is a day-use ski and snowboard area operating under a 2,500 acre permit in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie and Wenatchee National Forests. Located 80 miles northeast of the Seattle metropolitan region, we experience over 400,000 visits annually, served by a seasonal staff of over 900.

Generations of employees have watched the winter seasons come and go at Stevens Pass. Within the past two decades however, a decrease in the intensity of individual snowstorms coupled with greater variability in our winter weather pattern has become evident not only in statistical snow depth data, but also in the anecdotal recollections of many of our long term residents, employees, and guests.

As a locally owned company, we believe we have a responsibility to both the environment and the Pacific Northwest climate that allow us to conduct business at all. We know that combating the effects of global warming is critical for the future of entire ski/snowboard industry and we seek to lead by example in that arena, governed by our environmental plan. After operating at this location for 70 years, we also reckon that protecting and restoring the natural resources that have provided us our livelihood is the least we can do. And we believe that discerning day-use snow enthusiasts will favor a winter resort that acknowledges and mitigates its own impacts.

In summary, careful stewardship of the mountain environment is essential to the ongoing success of our winter resort, and we are committed to a genuine corporate environmental ethic. In fact, we think there is no alternative – we must act with sustainability in mind. As a result, over the past three years, we have taken a critical look at our operating protocols and philosophies, and assembled the environmentally-conscious operating model under which we do business today. Wide-ranging initiatives launched over the past several years, from mass transit to windpower, are indeed softening the resort's impact not just on the National Forest where we operate, but also far beyond.

2. Program Establishment

In developing our current environmental program, we identified five core disciplines that serve to organize the operating guidelines used across our entire mountain resort. Through innovation, sustainability, responsibility, integrity, and holistic stewardship, we have become an industry leader in environmental operating ethics for recreation in the Pacific Northwest. The program arose from management's interest in a sustainable future, concern about climate change and its impacts on our business, the ambition to make a difference as a leader in the industry, and a desire to catalyze other winter resorts into action. The assignment was given to a long standing staff member to research the situation, assess efforts at some of the larger sustainability-oriented resorts nationwide, and come up with some early actions after consulting with numerous frontlines staff. With information from the Nat'l Ski Areas Association (NSAA) Sustainable Slopes program, various conferences, and energy forums, our program started small a few years ago, and now has two full-time employees: the Director of Planning and Environmental Services, and our first Environment & Sustainability Manager, hired this season.

3. Goals and Benchmarking

Our comprehensive and continually evolving operating policy addresses the tangible local effects of climate change by confronting the larger issue of global warming head on. Simply put, our overarching goal is to reduce our own ecological footprint as much as possible while still operating a profitable commercial resort well into the future. Through our actions, we aim to serve as an example of environmentally conscious recreation in the Pacific Northwest, with the intention that other resorts will follow suit. Each year we develop tangible targets for various components within our plan (e.g. tons of recycling; greenhouse gases offset) and at the end of the winter season we evaluate the success either quantitatively or qualitatively depending on what's feasible, and also by means of guest and employee surveys. Components that meet ecological footprint concerns and save us money are especially compelling. This year, we are working towards issuing an annual Environment & Sustainability Report highlighting what we have achieved, and where we need to improve. Given some of our early achievements, we feel moderately successful, but acknowledge that many items are still falling through the cracks due to insufficient infrastructure, or inadequate measurement metrics.

Opportunities and challenges faced include many familiar factors. Ideally, we could use more employees devoted solely to the Environmental Services program; we are hamstrung occasionally by a lack of specialized equipment (to handle bulk recycling, for example); ensuring buy-in by all staff is a constant motivational task; participation by the public requires concerted educational efforts; and the erratic nature of this business niche can lead to operational crises in which guest safety for example may trump the environment as the foremost concern.

We use the results of our program to demonstrate our environmental commitment to other resorts, to the ski industry at large, and to prospective regional customers who may find our efforts a compelling distinction.

4. Outcomes and Environmental Benefit

Impact of program?

Like many resorts, our biggest single impact on the environment is energy consumption, probably followed in second place by foodservice operations. At Stevens Pass our annual energy consumption includes 4,700,000 kilowatt hours of electricity, nearly 100,000 gallons of propane, over 70,000 gallons of diesel and 20,000 gallons of gasoline. We are acutely aware of how much this contributes to our ecological and global impact – clearly we, and others, have a lot of work to do.

With an assignment to tackle this issue head on, we chose to explore a legitimate carbon-offset program to mitigate the greenhouse gas impacts of our operations. Working with the non-profit Bonneville Environmental Foundation, Stevens Pass elected to acquire about 6,000 third party certified “Green Tags” to offset 100% of our commercial and residential electricity use, as well as our propane use. As a result, in September 2007, we became the first winter resort in the Pacific Northwest to offset all of our energy consumption with the purchase of 100% green windpower, a fully renewable resource. By purchasing these offsets, we are able to support the greening up of the national power grid, the direct development of additional windfarms across the West, and meet our own goals for energy sustainability. We also decided to take the program a step further, and offer daily or seasonal “Green Tag” carbon offsets under the SkiGreen program, to our guests at the time of lift ticket/season pass purchase. This additional program raises awareness, encourages personal accountability, and helps mitigate the tailpipe emissions from vehicle travel to the mountains.

How well has it worked; and how well received?

We feel that in certain arenas our program has operated well, while others need further adjustment. As mentioned above, the ease of assessment in a company-wide ecological footprint approach can vary widely. Some initiatives that have been more easily measured include a fuel conservation program that has reduced overall diesel and gasoline fuel usage by approximately 10%. We have also been able to recycle approximately 25 tons of material annually (post-consumer, or industrial wastes); and all of our printed business materials utilize 100% post-consumer recycled stock as well as non-toxic, soy based inks produced by a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified printer located in Vancouver BC. We do receive positive guest comments about our environmental program, and we have begun to add these criteria to satisfaction surveys that we conduct during the season.

Revised plan/goals based on outcome?

We are always looking for ways to improve our program, and we make the most significant adjustments in the summer during our off-season. We also realize that some of our goals will take years to fully achieve. Other plan components will never pay for themselves, but can be underwritten by those components that do save us money (such as selling recyclables, and reducing fuel use).

Assessing value of program for limiting traveler footprint?

Looking at "traveler footprint" most literally, we are very pleased with this aspect of our environmental program, and can point to significant reduction in travel-related impacts. Back in 2000, we began a scheduled *Park & Ride* service based in the foothills to the west of the Cascade Mountains, in order to lessen single-occupant vehicle usage of the upper Stevens Pass Highway, reduce parking demand at the resort, and provide a lower-impact transportation option. Starting in winter 2008, we launched a direct bus shuttle service from downtown Seattle where the majority of our guests originate. Additionally we have developed a new online application for the popular social networking site, *Facebook*, which will enable guests to share their travel plans, driving routes, and snow-riding abilities in order to promote further carpool opportunities. Finally, over a decade ago, we launched an extensive bus transit fleet for employees, operating on both sides of the Cascade mountain range. Our fleet delivers over two million employee passenger miles per season, keeping hundreds of cars off the road every week, and preventing many tons of carbon emissions per day. Stevens Pass has received designation as one of the "*Best Workplaces for Commuters*" from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Replicability by others?

Some of our actions could be replicated simply by the decision to make a conscious financial and philosophical choice. It may sound obvious, but the best way to get a company thinking more ecologically is to hire someone to focus on just that – these issues are too big for a staff member to tackle "on the side." There needs to be an advocate for the environment who can at least participate in long-range planning, budgeting, capital purchase, hiring, and permitting discussions.

There are countless approaches towards reducing a company's ecological footprint, but many experts advise going after the 'low-hanging fruit' first. These are discrete changes that are relatively easy to implement, yet yield very significant improvements. Reducing and mitigating energy consumption and travel-impacts (such as tailpipe emissions) are two of the most important actions that can be taken because of their far-reaching effects. It is widely believed that concerns over climate change should trump all other ecological issues, and in the snow industry we are especially aware of this crisis.

5. Relevance to Traveler or Travel Industry

It's not clear exactly how we are affecting the travel industry as a whole, except that we are trying to set an example of what's possible even in a remote mountain setting where there's no nearby service town. Since we are a day-use resort, we believe that initiatives with greatest relevance to travelers are: the transit options, the opportunity to offset personal vehicle emissions, and the sustainability lessons learned here that may transfer back home. Most of our visitors hail from the environmentally-aware Seattle Metro region, and as such, we find them receptive to environmental messaging, and interested in reducing their own footprints where possible.

6. Real-World Example

Two examples from our operations come to mind that could be implemented across many scales and at any location, even by an individual, or a traveler in their home life:

Switching from paper to electronic systems when possible – For the 2008-09 season, we implemented a massive overhaul of our paper-based sales, ticketing, and rental systems using a cutting-edge electronic tracking and commerce system. This means quicker access to the lifts for our skiing and snowboarding guests, as well as less paperwork across the resort. For example, in our busy rental shop alone, this move reduced paper usage by 66 percent! In prior years, the amount of triplicate forms used each season would stretch 35 miles if lined up end-to-end. In addition, our lift tickets and discount cards will no longer be single-use paper products, but instead re-loadable, durable plastic versions, usable (even washable) for years. Obviously, not all resorts or businesses will have the same needs and operations, but opportunities to reduce paper use by implementing electronic sales systems, instituting paperless archive protocols, scanning documents to PDF format for email distribution, and converting common forms to be submitted electronically, can all make a huge difference.

Foodservice waste reduction – At Stevens Pass Resort we have already ceased all polystyrene foam (aka Styrofoam®) and most plastic usage, and this year we are crossing a significant threshold in our foodservice operations: soon, all the disposable food & beverage containers we use will be made from renewable cornstarch or paperboard, instead of traditional plastics. Indeed, many of these products go the extra step by also containing recycled post-consumer content. This not only reduces our reliance on non-renewable petrochemical products that still produce greenhouse gases during manufacture, but also saves landfill space because the wastes partially decompose. It costs us about the same, so the choice was easy, and we can obtain them from our normal foodservice supplier! Soon, we hope to close the loop by trying to pilot an offsite composting program for these same containers in addition to kitchen scraps and consumer food wastes, which should produce topsoil in 60 days. Certainly, not every business can compost, but most individuals can, at least on a small scale at home. For businesses, it is easy and fairly affordable to halt Styrofoam® use and find other alternatives – indeed many cities have already outlawed this material for take-out food containers due to its environmental lifespan and litter impacts. In the next 12 months, biodegradable containers will become much more available, but foodservice operations can accelerate this by asking their suppliers now to carry them.