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The Future Of Spring Skiing Predicted By U Researchers

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End of year celebration at Alta Ski Resort. Frank You! :)

It's not uncommon to see a Utah ski bum tossing their gear into the trunk of their car, driving up the mountain wearing shorts with unrolled windows. Sure, it's 70 degrees outside but in Utah, there's still snow on the mountains.

Yet, a new study released by U professors indicates spring skiing might be on a quicker decline than bombing down Brighton's Milly Bowl on freshly-waxed skis. Court Strong, associate professor of atmospheric sciences, says that elevation matters for the amount of snow a resort receives, and that elevation threshold is crucial.

Think of it this way: most ski resorts are above 6,500 feet because that is the current threshold. Past that elevation, precipitation is a good indicator of how much snow the ski resorts get while the temperature is practically irrelevant. By 2090, that threshold will be around 7,300 feet. It's doubtful the four Cottonwood resorts will be affected, but resorts in Park City, Sundance and Beaver Mountain will be. Instead of any precipitation being good for these resorts, they'll soon have to enter temperature into the equation to figure their presumed snow pack.

"People will come and ask, 'Hey should I buy a ski pass this year?' Right now, the question is, 'How wet is it going to be?' 70 years from now we also need to be thinking along the lines of, 'Will this be an unusually warm or cool year?'" Strong said.

Strong found this information using the Weather Research and Forecasting model he developed with Adam Kochanski, research associate of atmospheric sciences.

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For about five years, the team has been perfecting the regional-scale climate model and running simulations for snow patterns and temperatures with data from 1985 to 2010.

The model took future temperature changes into account, and uses a 4-km horizontal resolution of the Wasatch Range. They also used a 12-km domain for a model of the Western U.S. “Is there somewhere that we can find this research data?”

Strong and his team will now use the simulations to study monsoonal precipitations in southern Utah and air quality in the Salt Lake Valley.

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