

How ski resorts will be operating now that they are at Level Orange

By John Meyer, *The Denver Post* · Jan 11, 2021, 10:24 am

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Snow riders head out from the Summit House at Keystone Resort on Nov. 6, 2020. (Andy Cross, Denver Post file)

Now that ski areas in counties that were at Level Red on the Colorado COVID-19 dial have moved to Level Orange — even as winter snow conditions are making it possible for some resorts to open more terrain — perhaps you're thinking they will be able to accommodate a lot more skiers and riders than they did in December.

Actually, as with most issues related to COVID-19 public health guidelines, it's way more complicated than that.

"Additional terrain will allow for more skiers," Colorado Ski Country USA spokesman Chris Linsmayer wrote in an email. "What that means will vary from ski area to ski area — more reservations, more day tickets, etc. Ski areas will be making those decisions based on a number of factors like (past) visitation, visitation this season, terrain open, weather forecast, dial location, etc., to maintain social distancing and follow local indoor capacity limits."

The plans by which ski areas are operating were developed months ago in concert with local public health authorities and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. Several factors are used to determine how many skiers will be allowed on those mountains.

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"There isn't a fixed percentage by which visits can or will increase," Linsmayer said. "These plans are unique to each resort."

The four Aspen Snowmass mountains will soon be unique among themselves. The Pitkin County board of health decided to move back to Level Red on Sunday, due to a surge in COVID cases that has resulted in the highest incidence rate in Colorado. That means no indoor dining at Aspen, Aspen Highlands, Snowmass and Buttermilk.

Elsewhere the move from Level Red to Orange should be most noticeable in dining options, Linsmayer said.

"Outdoor dining and grab-and-go options are still the norm, and many indoor spaces will require a reservation or a wait to be seated," Linsmayer said. "Additional snowfall and terrain openings are helpful for getting guests up and dispersed across the mountains and reducing base area queues, as more guests can ski around without returning to base areas after every run."

As of this week, Vail, Beaver Creek and Crested Butte are "wide open" for reservations for the rest of the season, according to Lindsay Hogan, a spokeswoman for Vail Resorts. At Vail, it helped greatly that mountain managers were able to open China Bowl, Tea Cup Bowl and Blue Sky Basin two weeks ago, bringing Vail's amount of open terrain to

90%. Hogan said a couple of days are fully booked at the other Vail Resorts mountains in Colorado — Keystone and Breckenridge — but they could open up as more terrain becomes available.

At Copper Mountain, which is managing numbers by requiring reservations for parking rather than mountain access, spokeswoman Taylor Prather said that system is “adaptable” to accommodate higher numbers.

“Copper Mountain will continue to monitor the pandemic and all associated health guidelines, parking reservation user patterns, mountain terrain conditions and weather patterns, and will add parking reservation availability as the situation safely allows,” Taylor said in an email statement. “Based on those factors and our top priority to protect the well-being of our community, we are planning to increase the availability of parking, and encourage guests to check back often, including Mondays, when more inventory is released.”

Copper is making additional parking available with a new time slot beginning at 12:30 p.m. to accommodate skiers and riders willing to wait until after peak times, Prather added.

At Loveland, the change from Level Red to Orange won’t increase the number of people allowed on the slopes, but being able to open more terrain will.

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“The new snow has helped, but we still haven’t opened Lifts 4, 8, or 9,” Loveland spokesman John Sellers said. “When we get those open, we will be able to increase the amount of visitors we welcome to the mountain.”

Arapahoe Basin is operating at numbers initially approved for its opening in the fall.

“We are back to the capacity restrictions that were approved October 20 as part of our COVID-19 winter operating plan,” said Arapahoe Basin spokeswoman Katherine Fuller. “Nothing changes for food and beverage, because those outlets were already operating under Orange Level capacity restrictions via Summit County’s Five Star certification program.”

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