

Snow making on Cairn Gorm – HIE’s wasted investment

Description

What’s going on?

In 2018 after the funicular failed and Cairngorm Mountain Ltd ceased trading, Highlands and Island Enterprise (HIE) stepped in and set up Cairngorm Mountain [Scotland] Ltd (CMSL) with a share Capital of £100.

In an effort to keep the snowsports business going, HIE quickly purchased a TechnoAlpin SnowFactory and eight TechnoAlpin TR8 model fan guns ([see here](#)).



TechnoAlpin TR8 Fan Gun: in situ, ready for use
Alan Bratney

Photo credit

The cost was close to £1m in total with the fan guns costing in excess of £300k. By some

'coincidence', HIE then 'issued one million £1 shares in CMSL.....taking their shareholding to just over £1m.

It was clear from the outset that there was insufficient power on the hill to enable the use of the new snow making equipment and generators were hired to provide the required electricity. Ten generators were hired to supply ten fan guns. (The hill business already had three Model T40's and one Model TF10 onsite prior to the purchase of the eight TR8's). It was anticipated that an upgraded power supply would be cabled to the hill by Scottish and Southern Energy Networks and that would allow electrification of the snow making fleet. That has still not been done.

The next season generators were again used to power the fan guns. At that time Susan Smith, now CEO at CMSL but who was then the head of business development at HIE, had this to say: "The effort we are making will ensure the best possible snowsports experience on Cairn Gorm this winter. Snow Making will play a major role in this effort".

The online publication 'In the Snow' reported " Snow making is intended to guarantee snow on the lower beginner slopes and enable ski tows to take skiers to the upper slopes when conditions are good"

HIE then followed up the snow making purchases with a new Kassbohrer snow groomer the following year. That came in at £220k and was entirely grant funded. It was bought so that the machine-made snow could be perfectly groomed to provide the best possible snowsports surface.

Cairngorm Mountain Limited had previously proved that the real value of their snow making equipment was to maintain usable pistes on the lower slopes so that skiers and boarders had a reliable route back to the Daylodge

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Sheiling Piste being filled to fence height in 2013
Highland

Photo Credit Winter



TechnoAlpin T40 fan gun being used to good effect on the lower slopes in 2013. Photo Credit Winter Highland



Late April 2013 on the Sheiling Piste
Highland

Photo Credit Winter

Note how the machine-made snow has maintained a good cover while the surrounding area is virtually snow free. The operator was even able to provide skiers and boarders with some features to help to maintain late season interest.

As part of the investigation into the viability of snow making on Cairn Gorm, Winterhighland had used a mathematical regression analysis model that indicated that a complete piste from the Sheiling to the Daylodge resulted in up to 700 additional Day Tickets being sold on a decent weekend day.

It was clear that users weren't interested in a potentially long wait for the funicular to get down from the middle station to the car park when there was no snow on the lower pistes. Many people didn't bother going to Cairn Gorm when that was the case. Snow making was a large part of the answer in ensuring that a piste was there throughout the season and this paid for itself from the additional day ticket sales that resulted.

During last season, CMSL only hired in two generators which resulted in very sub-optimal use of the fan gun fleet and a poorer experience, at times, for those who chose to ski/board at Cairn Gorm.

The 2022/23 season is now up and running. Glenshee started offering lift served snowsports on 12th December, the Lecht will be opening for business this weekend while Glencoe has a large sledge park

open thanks to snow made by their snow factory. Meantime, although Cairn Gorm is now almost skiable anywhere, Cairngorm Mountain has announced that it will not be opening for the season until Weds 21 st December.

It seems that snow making doesn't feature in Cairngorm Mountain's plans for this season because no generators have been hired in to power their fan guns. At best, they will only be able to power a very few of them using the limited mains power available from the Daylodge and from the Sheiling Rope Tow hut. Why is snow making seen as less important now then it was in the 2018/19 season when all the equipment was purchased?

At noon on Monday 12 December Cairngorm Mountain had one fan gun operating adjacent to the Daylodge and one operating close to the Control Hut at the Sunkid Rope Tow. This was in very low temperatures, no wind but only two out of 12 operating



TR8 located adjacent to the top of the Sunkid Rope Tow: switched off during the very cold spell.
Photo Credit Alan Bratney



T40 Located below the Sheiling: Never switched on during the very cold spell. Photo credit Alan Bratney

Photo credit



A T40 and a TR8 stored outside the pump house not located where they might be used. Photo Credit Alan Bratney

Snow making could have been ongoing on a 24/7 basis for the last nine days, up to 13th December 2022, and it looks like the cold conditions are set to persist for a while longer. Unusually for Scotland

there has been very little wind and with the low temperatures the 12 fan guns could have ensured that Cairn Gorm would have been able to offer a continuous piste from the Sheiling to Daylodge throughout the coming season, barring an unprecedented long thaw.

CMSL was provided with 100% grant funding for the SnowFactory and the eight TR8 Fan Guns while the other ski areas were given just 40% grant funding for much less snow making equipment. The only possible [but very thin] justification for that would be to provide economic benefit to the Badenoch and Strathspey winter tourism economy. There's no benefit to be had, however, from equipment that is not used as intended and the management at CMSL are doing the Speyside winter economy a significant disservice by failing to utilise the snow making equipment that was provided to them for free.

HIE say that Cairn Gorm is important in "Generating significant economic benefits for the local area". They might want to revisit that statement in light of the operational management decisions now being made.

Over £30m has been committed to repairing the funicular as well as other works such as the car park rebuild, improvements to the Ptarmigan and two Magic Carpets. To now adopt a shameful penny-pinching operational strategy towards snow making will do nothing to help to encourage the tens of thousands of snowsports enthusiasts who have forsaken Cairn Gorm for other centre. It will also do nothing to assist the local winter economy.

Providing so much equipment on a 100% grant funded basis and then watch as it lies little used is shameful, unacceptable and frankly beggars belief when you consider the many £millions of scarce public funding that has been poured into this business.

What needs to happen now:

Action should be taken immediately to be sure that the Snow Making Fan Guns are used at every opportunity, failing which they should be offered to the other areas where they can be used to good effect.

HIE should reconsider the decision to appoint the present CEO who clearly doesn't have the qualifications or experience to manage the hill business competently and effectively.

Category

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