

With Little Snow And No Work, A Musher Worries



With less snow because of a drought in California, Jim Ouimet, far left, the owner of Mammoth Dog Teams, has not led a tour since March 2013. A dog waited at its dish, and Ouimet petted Vortex, near left.



By DAN ROBERT KRAUSS

In the mountains of Mammoth Lakes, the California drought has taken a large toll on a local business that thrives on snow. The effects have left Jim Ouimet and his 35 dogs nearly out of work.

Ouimet is the owner of Mammoth Dog Teams, a mushing company about five miles outside of town that offers sled-dog tours, providing a firsthand experience of one of the earliest modes of transportation.

An outdoorsman, mountain climber and sled-dog musher, Ouimet, 47, returned to Mammoth Lakes, his birthplace, in the late 1980s after serving four and a half years in the Marines, and he began working with Paul Marvelly and his company, Dog Sted Adventures. There, Ouimet learned the craft of mushing. He took over the business, which is housed in a former jailhouse, in 1999 and renamed it Mammoth Dog Teams.

Along the way, he worked with Libby Riddles, a champion of the Iditarod sled-dog race, and Joe Redington Sr., who was known as the father of the Iditarod. Ouimet continues to lead clinics and local pre-

sentations to promote the sport of mushing.

During Ouimet's busy season, the snowy stretch of winter, two teams of dogs make five runs a day, or about 30 miles for the dogs and their mushers.

But in the past three years, the worsening drought has meant less and less snow on the peaks of the Eastern Sierras, leaving Ouimet and his dogs and three other mushers out of work. The last sled-dog tour for Ouimet and his crew was in March 2013. In January 2014, the peak of the drought, the well at his kennel went dry, forcing him to drive into town twice a week to fill 33-gallon water containers so the dogs would have enough to drink.

Ouimet has used loans from friends and relatives to help get him through — he estimates that he spends about \$10,000 year just to feed the dogs — but he worries about where he will turn next if the drought stretches on. His most pressing concern is the animals' welfare.

"They're my kids," he said. "I'm pretty much everything to them. I am the father, the mother, the guidance counselor, the disciplinarian and the feeder. I do everything for them. I'm with them 24/7."



Ouimet said he spent about \$10,000 a year to feed his 35 dogs. He took over the company in 1999 from Paul Marvelly, in a photograph at left. Above, pipes fed hot springs.



The well at the kennel outside Mammoth Lakes, Calif., ran dry in January, and Ouimet had to drive to town twice a week to fill 33-gallon containers with water so the dogs had enough to drink. Batman, right, a cat, lay on an Alaskan freight sled that Ouimet built from Kentucky red oak. "If you're going to make one, you might as well make two," Ouimet said of the sleds, which are used on tours.

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Ouimet sat near the kennel, which was covered in snow two days earlier. While the Eastern Sierras at higher elevations have snow, the trails are lower, and the snow melts quickly. Using trails with no snow can injure the dogs and damage the trails.