

Producers scout Alaska for action film with big budget

'THE PEAK': Production of film, with climber rescuing family, hinges on economics, tax break.

By KYLE HOPKINS

khopkins@adn.com

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Alaska movie-watchers: This one could be bigger than "Whales."

A team of action-movie producers is in Anchorage this week researching a feature film about mountain climbing that they hope to film in Alaska as early as next year.

The movie is tentatively titled "The Peak," and it would tell the fictional story of a girl and her woefully unprepared parents who crash in the mountains wearing tennis shoes and jeans. A skookum rescue climber attempts to save the family.

"We set it here because we want to make it here," producer David Greathouse said Thursday as the group prepared to scout potential production buildings in Anchorage.

It's unclear how much the film would cost. Another producer, Lucas Foster, estimated the budget in the "many tens of millions."

The price tag would far exceed the more than \$30 million spent on "Everybody Loves Whales," said Foster, whose producer credits include "Bad Boys," "Law Abiding Citizen" and the Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie shoot-'em-up "Mr. & Mrs. Smith."

The producers arrived in Alaska on Tuesday. They spent Wednesday flying by helicopter to Matanuska Glacier, Lake George and other locations as they prepare to tweak a long-simmering script about a dangerous mountain rescue.

"It's not like you've got to go to some place and try to help them imagine what it might be like with enough special effects and whatnot," said Colby Coombs, a founder of the Alaska Mountaineering School who traveled with the group. "The mountains do the talking."

Simon Crane, stunt coordinator on "Mr. & Mrs. Smith," "Salt" and the upcoming "Men in Black III," is set to direct, Foster said.

As the state Legislature considers extending or tweaking a generous tax subsidy that allows filmmakers to recover as much as 44 percent of their in-state spending, Alaska film-boosters are courting producers like Foster in hopes of landing another major production.

Like all big-budget films, there's no guarantee the mountain-climbing movie will be made -- or made in Alaska.

"As long as it makes economic sense to shoot it here, we'll shoot it here," Foster said over a pancake breakfast at the Hotel Captain Cook.

Alaska's tax incentive is a major factor in the decision, he said. The producer, a blunt-spoken man in a faded Yankees cap and black North Face jacket, literally gave the finger to the state of Michigan at the breakfast table to show what he thought of Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's move to slash that state's film incentives.

When producers find a place to film that works, they come back, he said. If filming "The Peak" goes well in Alaska, the producer said, he'd consider shooting more movies here in the future.

"I can make an action movie that I was going to shoot in Louisiana in Alaska, if I want to," Foster said.

A RESCUE STORY

"The Peak," which also has been called "The Tooth" and may end up with another title altogether, is an action thriller. Filming could take 13 or 14 weeks, with pre- production beginning months earlier.

Filming is at least a year away and would likely take place in the summer, Foster said.

In the script, a journalist takes his wife and 11-year-old daughter into the mountains to write a feature or lifestyle story. Kind of a family vacation on the boss's dime, the producers said.

"He's a little bit of a jerk in the sense that he brings his family to a place that he really shouldn't have brought them," Foster said. "They're really sort of ill-equipped to be here."

An experienced mountain climber serves as the family's guide and becomes protective of the girl. "It's not her fault she has (idiot) parents," Foster said.

While flying home in a Bush plane, the journalist pushes for his pilot to fly higher and higher for photos. Disaster follows.

"(The plane) drills itself into the mountain; the fuselage breaks up," Foster said.

The mountain climber -- who the producers said would likely be played by a male movie star in his 30s or early 40s -- must lead a rescue team to the crash site.

"We're deciding whether we want to make those climbers PJs (parajumpers) or not. Park rangers. We're not sure yet, as we adjust the script to the reality that we're learning about," Foster said.

The climber tries to keep the isolated girl's spirits up, possibly in a series of a satellite phone conversations, and the story revolves around her connection with the rescue climber, the producers said.

The film has not been cast, they said.

SCOUTING TRIP

A recent draft of the script was set in the Himalayas. Foster and Greathouse, with line producer Bill Wilson and development executive Gregory Veeser, are researching Alaska in an effort to set the story here.

The producers are scouting locations similar to those in the story, talking with Alaskan mountain climbers and rescue experts and looking for potential soundstages in Anchorage.

"We really liked Talkeetna. That is a cool little town," Greathouse said.

Coombs, co-founder of the Talkeetna-based mountaineering school, flew with the group in a pair of R44 helicopters from Girdwood to visit glaciers, icebergs and Hatcher Pass, he said.

"What's different in Alaska compared to other places is you don't have to improvise," Coombs said. Want mountains and glaciers? They're right out the back door, he said.

The producers expect the action movie to appeal to international audiences.

"Our movies get seen by 80 million people around the world or more," said Foster, whose producer credits also include "Jumper," "Walking Tall" and "Crimson Tide."

"Our point of view is there hasn't really been a climbing movie that had an authenticity to it," he said. "The last climbing movie that was made, that was a major theatrical release in North America, was 20 years ago."

That film, "Vertical Limit," was well cast but unrealistic, the producers said.

"It had a guy jumping across a crevasse with two ice axes and slamming into the side of the mountain and saving himself," Greathouse said.

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