

Low snowmelt buoys rafting companies

POSTED: 05/01/2012 01:00:00 AM MDT
UPDATED: 05/01/2012 10:22:52 AM MDT

By Jason Blevins
The Denver Post



Rafters in 2011 hold on while they make a trip down Clear Creek. Heavy snowpack that year kept a lot of rafters out of the water until late July. Outfitters are hoping for a normal year this season. (RJ Sangosti, *The Denver Post* file)

The last time Colorado snowpack was as feeble as it is this spring — at the apex of a parching drought in 2002 — commercial rafters saw summer business plummet 40 percent. Even though statewide snowpack levels are worse today than this point in 2002, rafting outfitters on 27 stretches of whitewater around Colorado are not worried.

In fact, they are happier than they were last year, when monster snowpack flooded rivers and delayed the start of most commercial operations for a month or longer.

"Sometimes during high water, our numbers are down because people want to wait for a more normal year," said David Costlow, executive director of the 50-member Colorado River Outfitters Association. "We think this could be a normal year."

All that snow in 2010-11 swelled rivers last summer and pinched rafting business, but it filled the state's vast network of reservoirs. Since most every flowing river in Colorado is controlled by dam releases from those reservoirs, the rafting season shouldn't be painfully impacted this year.

In fact, without a torrent of snowmelt, outfitters are hoping to start ferrying guests earlier than usual, especially after last year, when commercial rafters didn't really start rolling with guests until late July. But then last year, some rafters were running trips into early fall, which is unlikely to happen this year.

Last year, with a deep spring snowpack fueling record runoff, commercial rafting [in Colorado hosted 508,664 raft riders who stirred \\$155.2 million in economic impact](#), roughly mirroring the previous year.

In 2002 outfitters tallied 315,437 user days and a \$77.7 million economic impact, a decline of more than 200,000 visits from 2001 and a nearly \$50 million loss in economic activity.

[But going into the 2002 rafting season, statewide reservoir storage was low, only 88 percent of average in early April](#), with southern Colorado basins much lower, according to reports from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. And tourism across the state took a hit that summer with widespread wildfires and a loose-tongued governor muttering about the entire state being on fire.

This year, thanks to bountiful snow in early 2011, [statewide reservoir storage at the beginning of April was 108 percent of average](#).

Great season to learn kayaking

For kayakers, though, the season looks dismal, with weak flows expected to peak six weeks earlier than usual and free-flowing stretches of difficult whitewater not expected to even run. It's the exact opposite of last season, when record flows swelled just about every stream in the state and stayed up through August.

"It's definitely coming early. It feels like you have to get it while you can. This might be the only chance you get," said Evan Stafford, an expedition kayaker and co-author of the essential "Whitewater of the Southern Rockies" guidebook.

This season, Stafford plans to seek out the biggest rivers in the country — such as the Middle Fork of the Salmon in Idaho — and pursue a quality experience over daily missions.

"It's not going to be a good year for small creeks and really most everything in Colorado," he said. "It could be a great season to learn though."

Full reservoirs mean busy time

The full reservoirs bode well for outfitters who are hoping for a busy season, especially on the Arkansas River, the nation's most commercially rafted river, which last year hosted more than 208,000 paying rafters. The Arkansas is the only river in the western U.S. to have a program that maintains a constant flow for recreation during peak summer periods. The river's [21-year-old Voluntary Flow Management Plan](#) — a cooperative deal between commercial rafters, fishermen, downstream users and state wildlife, parks and natural resources managers — keeps the Arkansas rolling at 700 cubic feet per second from July 1 through Aug. 15 with regularly adjusted supplemental flows.

"I think the flow program is something that will separate us from other rivers this year," said Bob Hamel, owner of Arkansas River Tours and board member of the Arkansas River Outfitters Association.

Low flows appeal to Marty Genereux, owner of the 28-year-old Centennial Canoe Outfitters.

"It takes about 6 inches to float a canoe," he said. "I'm thrilled we are not going to have the drama we had last year, which was pretty much over the top."

Jason Blevins: 303-954-1374 or jblevins@denverpost.com

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