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READY TO FLOW



With record snowpacks still adding inches, Colorado rafting outfitters can hardly wait for a long, strong runoff

By Jason Blevins *The Denver Post*

With snow still pounding the deepest-in-decades high-country snowpack, the state's rafting outfitters are giddily bracing for an epic runoff that could buoy the state's \$150 million rafting industry.

That record-breaking snowpack — with the Colorado, Yampa and White river basins nearing 200 percent of their 30-year average and several others near 150 percent — harbors both a blessing and a curse for Colorado's commercial rafting outfitters, who last year hosted more than 507,000 paddlers. When the weather warms, that initial surge of cascading snowmelt will certainly close stretches of steep and swollen rivers for commercial rafting and elevate the difficulty of traditionally mellower stretches.

But that same bountiful snowpack also promises raging rafting deep into summer.

"We are looking at a great summer runoff, not just the spring runoff," said Alex Mickel, owner of Durango's Mild to Wild Rafting. "The theme for rafting this season in Colorado should be options, options, options."

On the Eagle River, where rafters and kayakers typically have already begun their season, the recent low trickle indicates a still-building snowpack up high. But the slow start is offset by hopes for big flows through July.

"We are certain to see the longest season on the Eagle River that we have seen in many years," said Lisa Reeder, co-owner of the Vail Valley's Timberline Tours.

"Still accumulating"

The last time the Eagle River ran deep into summer, in 2008 with the Colorado River Basin 146 percent of average in early June, the upper portion of the river hosted more than 4,300 commercial rafters. Last year, with a sudden early surge stealing all the flows and whittling the Colorado River basin to 57 percent of average in early June, the upper Eagle saw fewer than 1,100 commercial rafters.

Typically, rafting outfitters couch their optimism with fear of an extraordinary heat wave that brings the entire snow supply down in a single surge. Even if there's a heat wave this season, which would result in dangerous flooding and surely close vast stretches of river, it won't decimate a snowy stockpile measured in the dozens of feet.

"It's still accumulating up there," said John Rice, whose Clear Creek Rafting Co. runs trips on Clear Creek and the Arkansas River.

The lack of desert dirt that has painted Colorado's peaks in the past few springs promises to deliver a more even flow, without the dark layer absorbing heat and melting snow more quickly.

Still, it's not going to take much of a heat wave to spike local rivers.

The hard will get harder

Commercial outfitters on the Arkansas River expect to temporarily suspend trips on the famous Class V Pine Creek stretch — which the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area advises against boating once flows top 1,250 cubic feet per second.

But that doesn't bother many outfitters on the heavily trafficked river. (The Arkansas River is the most rafted river in the country and accounts for more than 41 percent of the state's rafting business.) That peak means the river's popular downstream Numbers, Browns Canyon and Royal Gorge sections will swell to meet the needs of thrill-seekers who pine for that Class V experience.

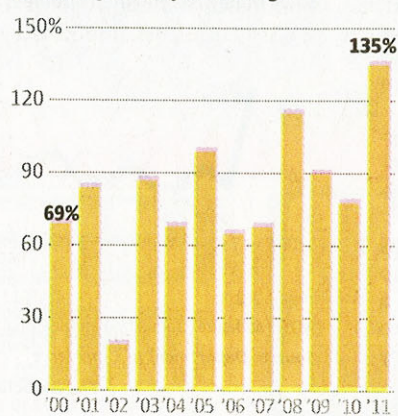
"We expect the more difficult sections of the Arkansas River to be too high for rafting much of the month of June, but in turn the easier sections will each bump up a difficulty level, making great choices for all experience levels all season long," said Joe Greiner, owner of Wilderness Aware rafting on the Arkansas River. "We are anxious for the weather to warm up to spread out the great runoff we are expecting."

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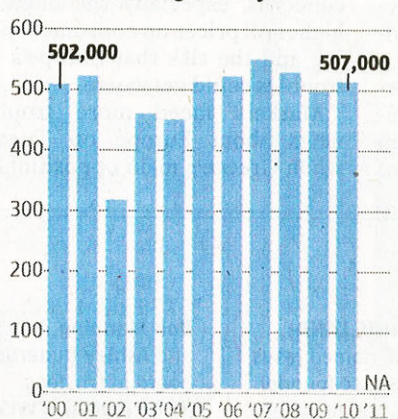
Rollin' on the rivers

Rafting outfitters hope the state's high snowpack translates into strong business.

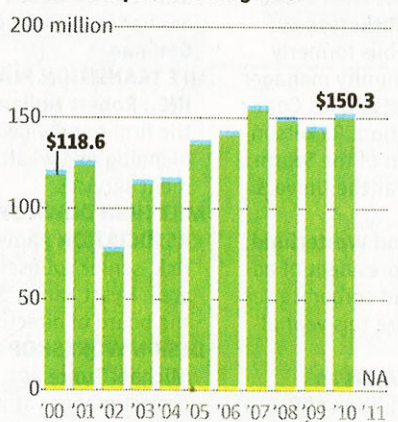
May 1 statewide river basin snowpack percentage of 30-year average



Commercial rafting user days



Economic impact of rafting visits



Source: Natural Resources Conservation Service, Colorado River Outfitters Association