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AHRA reports more than 2.5% increase in rafting

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Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area reported a more than 2.5 percent increase in rafting customers after release of the December preliminary ration numbers for 2010.

The number of commercial user days was 211,150 during 2010 compared with 205,876 in 2009.

John Kreski, rationing and agreement coordinator for the recreation area, said the numbers are a preliminary count and the figure doesn't take into account private boaters, guides and safety kayakers on the river.

Commercial users days on the Arkansas River Colorado River Outfitters Association and AHRA

1998 - 250,098

1999 - 243,709

2000 - 250,861

2001 - 252,213

2002 - 139,178

2003 - 214,555

2004 - 203,840

2005 - 228,091

2006 - 237,160

2007 - 239,887

2008 - 214,234

2009 - 205,876

2010 - 211,150

He said the number of commercial user days is taken from whitewater rafting and fishing outfitters who have a specific number of rations for their respective companies.

Within those numbers they report guides and safety kayakers for a total of 262,122 user days in 2010, up from 254,431 in 2009 accounting for a 3 percent increase overall.

The increase followed two years of consecutive decline reported from 2007 to 2009. The number remains lower than the boom years from 1998 to 2001 when numbers commonly exceeded 250,000 user-days annually.

Kreski said in addition to 55 boating agreements with the recreation area, there are 15 walk-and-wade fishing permits, three shuttle operators and two rock climbing outfits permitted by Colorado State Parks in the Upper Arkansas Valley.

Kreski said the numbers are used to budget for future rationing from sections of river north of Buena Vista downstream through Cañon City.

Bob Hamel owns Arkansas River Tours of Cotopaxi. He said he was initially surprised to hear Arkansas River outfitters had done so well during the last year.

He said word of mouth accounts he heard from outfitters on other rivers didn't see as great an improvement.

Hamel is immediate past chairman of **Colorado River Outfitters Association**. He said Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area is typically one of the quicker agencies when it comes to releasing reports about river use.

The outfitters association takes data compiled from each of 17 commercially rafted Colorado rivers, which are further broken into 27 major tributaries or sections on those rivers.

The outfitters association releases a full detail annual report including not only user numbers, but estimated economic impact in early February.

The Arkansas River typically accounts for the largest share of rafting revenue of any other commercially rafted drainage in Colorado.

Comparative numbers from companies operating in the Upper Arkansas Valley in 2009 accounted for 42.3 percent of all commercial river traffic in the state.

In 2009 statewide economic impact was estimated at \$141 million.

"We've seen ups and downs from the beginning and the boom in the 1980s, but I think the demographic has matured and people are still going to come rafting even if they're tightening their belts," Hamel said.

Kreski said within the 2010 number he noticed the greatest increases during July and August. He said from 2009 to 2010 numbers in June jumped by 180 people but during July there was an 8-percent increase.

Kreski speculated that jump had to do with vacationers on road trips and a correlation in local sales and lodging taxes for the third quarter of the year reflected it.