

The Pueblo Chieftain

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River rafting numbers rise

Despite slow economy, visitors flocking to Upper Arkansas River.



The thrill of whitewater rafting draws thousands of visitors to the Arkansas River. [Chieftain Photo/File]

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SALIDA — Rafting outfitters were riding high in 2010 with an increase of nearly 3 percent among clients visiting the area for outdoor adventure.

According to Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area Rationing Coordinator John Kreski, boating client use was up 2.56 percent over last year with a total of 262,122 people taking to the river on commercial rafting trips. A total of 254,431 clients rafted the river in 2009.

"That's good news," said Bob Hamel of Cotopaxi, owner of Arkansas River Tours and president of [Colorado River Outfitters Association](#). "That is what you would predict or hope for even in a good economy, so Colorado continues to hang in there."

Hamel said he attributes the good numbers to several economic factors. He said shorter trips are still affordable for families, pricing has held for two to three years and discounts are available.

The biggest jump in users came among anglers. Float fishing raft trips are a segment of the industry that bring in business during shoulder season months before and after the main rafting season of June, July and August.

"Commercial walk and wade fishing use is up 15.37 percent as many are recognizing the great fishery the Arkansas River provides for both float fishing and walk and wade anglers," Kreski said.

"An Arkansas float fishing trip is within reach when you compare it to going on a fishing trip to someplace like Alaska or Argentina," Hamel said. "It is all baby boomer driven and although some people are without a job there are still people working."

Commercial Boating Use on the Arkansas River

<u>Year</u>	<u>Rafters</u>
2005	271,280
2006	282,381
2007	295,172
2008	265,422
2009	254,431
2010	262,122

— Source: Colorado State Parks, Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area

Kreski said the numbers for rafting and fishing use are impressive considering tough economic times.

"It is encouraging to see that the Arkansas River use numbers are up in this sluggish economy. I feel it reiterates that Coloradoans live and play in our beautiful scenery and climate — we are our own vacation paradise," Kreski said.

"I think people are travelling locally from the Front Range area and it is especially important to the upper mountain communities where we rely on tourism. The Colorado State Parks, including the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area, offer a tremendous recreational resource for those who want to enjoy outdoor Colorado," Kreski said.

"Rafting is something people are going to find out how to do," even with a tight budget, Hamel said.