



Local rafting companies ready for action

Commercial rafting companies could get extra weeks on the Eagle River

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Rafters, from left, Brenna Frank, Melissa Laliberte, Andre Skweir and Craig Dodge (underseen), raft through a stretch of whitewater Saturday on the Eagle River past Wolcott. The rafters, who try to raft every weekend, said they have noticed a significant drop in the water levels since their record high levels two weeks ago that caused flooding in sections of the rivers throughout the Vail Valley.

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What's out there?*

22.8 inches: "Snow water equivalent" on the upper Colorado River as of May 26.

8.8 inches: The historic snow water equivalent for that date.

* Figures are average for the upper Colorado River basin.

EAGLE COUNTY, Colorado – A wet, cloudy May has kept local rafting companies off the Eagle River until the past few days. That's the bad news. The good news is that, with a little luck, tourists could be rafting the Eagle past July 4 this year.

Usually, the previous winter's snow has melted enough by the end of June that local companies are usually about done putting guests on the Eagle, which means longer drives for trips on the Colorado or Arkansas rivers.

This year is different. There's still plenty of snow on the slopes, and so far, water's coming off slowly. If the weather holds, or just doesn't get hot too quickly, this year's rafting season on the Eagle could be stretched out by several weeks.

"If we can get through the Fourth of July we'll be really pleased," said Lisa Reeder, operations manager for Eagle-based Timberline Tours. "This year we're pretty much guaranteed to get there, and we could see good water on the Eagle until Aug. 1."

Greg Caretto of Nova Guides agreed that the Eagle's season could stretch out by several weeks this year.

Darryl Bangert, owner of Sage Outdoor Adventures, has been studying Gore Creek carefully over the last few weeks and believes a modest meltdown could have his company putting tourists on that stream well into July.

As of late last week, Gore Creek was running slowly through Vail, as slowly as it's run this time of year for the past 15 years or so. Meanwhile, giant piles of snow remain on the hillsides, just ready to melt.

"I'm ecstatic at the prospect," Bangert said.

If the snow comes off too fast, though, the Eagle can run perilously close to the several bridges that cross it between Minturn and Eagle. That makes the river unsafe for commercial rafting trips, so local companies head for the Colorado or the Arkansas.

But the local companies prefer the Eagle — rafting in the Vail Valley means shorter drives and the ability to schedule more trips.

And rafting seems to be something of a last-minute decision. Both Caretto and Reeder said advance reservations aren't nearly as important as warm, sunny weather that encourages summer visitors to book a raft trip while they're here.

"It was like clockwork (May 25)," Reeder said. "The sun came out for about three hours and the phone started to ring."

According to the Colorado River Outfitters Association, those ringing phones across the Rockies put more than 500,000 people into rafts last year, generating more than \$150 million in economic activity.

That's why Caretto every company monitors river levels every day during the season, and why companies can decide from day to day where their trips will go.

Even with the potential of big water coming downstream soon, Caretto said it's "business as usual" at his company, at least as far as watching streams is concerns.

But, he added, "It has the potential to be a good season."