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River outfitters reexamine future as Yampa River continues to see shorter recreation seasons

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Tubers head down the Yampa River early Monday afternoon, but rising water temperatures may make sights like this rare as the summer progresses. If water temperatures exceed 75 degrees for two days in a row, commercial tubing operations will be shut down and a voluntary closure would ask all river users to stay out of the water.

John F. Russell/Steamboat Pilot & Today

Steamboat Springs Parks and Recreation Commission will review new requests for businesses looking to recreate on the Yampa River for 2022, as well as proposed use changes for current outfitters, on March 9.

Interested businesses are required to submit a detailed business and operating plan for proposed use, which should include safety plans, daily numbers, times and areas of use, as well as demonstrate understanding of commercial guidelines and city planning codes.

While businesses grandfathered in under the [Yampa River Management Plan](#) do not have to reapply for a permit, several outfitters said they are concerned about the future of river recreation, as a series of low-snow years and climbing temperatures have shortened the river season.

The plan requires the city to close the river if the water reaches or goes below 85 cubic feet per second. The river cannot open for rafting or tubing until it dips below 700 cfs.

Peter Van De Carr, owner of Backdoor Sports, one of the three outfitters grandfathered into the river management plan, said



Carr said drought years are almost expected, which makes running a business that relies on a thriving river difficult.

“Climate change is definitely rocking our boat,” Van De Carr said. “Whether or not I can weather the storm with back-to-back years, we’ll have to see how that goes.”

Van De Carr was optimistic about the summer a month ago, as Steamboat was receiving back-to-back winter storm warnings, and snow pack was nearing what he would have considered a “good year.”

Now, the picture Van De Carr sees is more bleak.

“I’m just trying to roll with the punches, and everyone is equally as confused as I am because we don’t know what the weather is going to do,” Van De Carr said. “It was optimistic a month ago, but now it’s like, ‘Holy cow, not another one.’”

Mike Weissbluth, [a local meteorologist and author of SnowAlarm.com](#),  predicted a dry weekend with warming temperatures into the next week.

Still, Jarett Duty, owner of Bucking Rainbow outfitters, said there is at least a month of winter left, and a wet spring could save the river season.

“We’ve been doing this for 28 years, and we’ve learned you really can’t sweat it until you get somewhere closet to April or May,” Duty said. “A wet March and April changes everything, or a super hot May can take the best year into a worst year.”

Duty said his business has permits on the Elk, Yampa, North Platte, Colorado and Eagle rivers, which he hopes to rely on in coming years, as the Steamboat stretch of the Yampa has seen shrinking seasons several years in a row.

“If you look at our business as a whole, there’s no way it’s viable,” Duty said. “But when we raft the Colorado and other rivers, we have access to different stuff.”

Duty said rafting season typically comes before tubing season, as rafting requires higher flows than tubing does. In a good year, rafting lasts until about July 4, then tubing lasts the rest of the summer into the fall.

In 2021, Duty said tubing “ended before it even started,” [as the river hit 85 cfs right after July 4](#).

“Tubing was a bust this year,” Duty said.

In the future, Van De Carr said he and other river operators may need to reexamine their business plans, which is difficult to do, as they have employees relying on them for income and a community relying on them for recreation.

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