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Colorado River guides and business owners navigate an economy as unrelenting as the Arkansas River

The Biden administration enacted a new rule in January requiring all permit-holders on federal lands to pay employees \$15 an hour—a move that threatens to disrupt the river rafting industry's decades-old practice of trip pay.

AMANDA PAMPURO / May 14, 2022



Water flows down the Numbers, a popular white water rafting run, in Buena Vista, Colo., May 2022 (Amanda Pampuro/Courthouse News).

BUENA VISTA, Colo. (CN) — Mid-May snow thaws off the Sawatch and Mosquito mountains building big water and falls down the 1,469-mile-long Arkansas River. Watching the sun's refractions illuminate the crystal water rushing through Chaffee County, Colorado, it's easy to see why someone would choose to make their living on the river.

"At the end of the day you just got off a river in the mountains and you're surrounded by your friends," said raft guide Jess Beaty at the start of her fourth season. While petting a pit bull-lab mix named Mosa in the Gold Camp lounge, she said she's eager to bring adventurous tourists out to experience nature.

"Sometimes you really change things for a person and that makes it totally worth it," Beaty said. Still, Beaty's been around long enough to know the job ain't all pleasure cruises.

"Rafting is a service industry," Beaty said. "The only way we're able to break even is tips. If you're really good with customers, if you're lucky or your team

leader gives you people that look like they're going to tip, that makes the difference between making 100 bucks a day or making 300 bucks a day.”

Though she put in her dues elsewhere, this is Beaty's first year working for Arkansas Valley Adventures (AVA) in Buena Vista, Colorado. The company is suing the U.S. Department of Labor over a new wage scheme requiring a \$15 an hour minimum wage and overtime for federal permit holders.

The Colorado River Outfitters Association, an influential industry group, joined AVA in the lawsuit, but one voice has largely been absent from the conversation: the guides who work on the river, whose earnings and working conditions are being reviewed by the courts.



AVA headquarters in Buena Vista, Colo., May 2022 (Amanda Pampuro/Courthouse News).

Raft guides earn “trip pay,” a set wage for each tour, keeping prices consistent for customers whether they book during early season high waters or the late summer lazy river. At AVA, a rookie guide makes \$50 on three-to-four-hour trips with additional prep and post-trip duties. A trip leader with several seasons of experience makes \$82 for the same trip.

Most guides take two to three trips, six or seven days a week to save enough to last through winter sports season, but also because taking a true day off can mean being deprioritized on future tours. On standby, guides pick up boathouse chores while waiting to take out a possible last-minute group.

The company compensates seasonal workers \$15 an hour for the grunt work, but other outfitters reportedly take advantage of the free labor.

Starting at the bottom of the pay scale, rookie guides often spend about \$1,000 on gear, training and certification before taking out their first boat.

There's no company health insurance for guides, though the job is physically demanding, with common hip, back, wrist and shoulder injuries.

With costs of living on the rise, many find the grind less liberating and more demoralizing.

“I love rafting, and I want to teach people about the environment through rafting,” said Teal Lehto, a former competitive paddler and guide. “I want to teach people how to raft, and I love everything about that, but it is not worth the expectation of being homeless and working for terrible wages just to be outside every day.”

After paddling through high school and competing at nationals, Lehto wanted to make a living doing what she loved. When she added up her hours, however, she realized she was making less than the promised \$13 an hour in Durango, Colorado.

Lehto moderates a private Facebook group where raft guides gather to discuss higher wages and better benefits. But standing up has meant stepping out.

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“Since I have started speaking out about this, I definitely will not be able to work as a raft guide in this community again,” Lehto said.

“I don't want to see any small local businesses go out of business, but also I think that if your business only runs on unpaid labor, then your business is unsustainable,” she added. “People are really tired of being told that they can be paid in sunshine and good vibes.”

Wages across America have largely stagnated. The pandemic migration of high-income remote workers exasperated a tight real estate market in Colorado [mountain towns](#) and the down-valley communities once seen as affordable alternatives.

“There's this culture and this sensibility around a lot of guiding services that the glory and the mystique of being a river guide is pay enough,” said Megan Lawson, an economist at the nonprofit Headwaters Economics in Montana. “What's happening now is this recognition that the privilege of being able to spend your days working on a river, while wonderful, doesn't get you housing or pay for food.”

Lawson [considered](#) the pandemic the latest factor amid “long-term trends in demographics, the labor market, mortgage rates, housing supply, land use policies and climate-driven disasters [that] have all have contributed to the current crisis.”

Per MIT's Living Wage Calculator, a single adult without kids [needs](#) to make at least \$16.14 an hour to make ends meet in Chaffee County.

Most guides swing it by living a "dirtbag" lifestyle. They pay employers to camp on-site and live minimally. For many 20-somethings with simple needs, the term is one of endearment and resourcefulness. But as they grow older, dirtbag comes to symbolize a lack of upward mobility.

“When I decided to be a guide and I realized that I was never going to make money doing it, I embraced it fully. I was going to follow my heart and be a dirtbag. There was an absolute sense of pride in it when I was young,” recalled Elisha McArthur, founder of Canyon River Instruction. “Of course, as I got older and I became a mom, I realized I can't raise a kid like this.”

McArthur has long called on the industry to value guides as certified professionals and promote gender equality amid a masculine culture known to downplay reported sexual harassment and assault. She nevertheless struggles to fit the federal government's newly mandated overtime into her budget. Instead of paying time-and-a-half, many businesses will cut hours.

“I'm worried because I feel like guides aren't going to be able to make as much money as they would, ironically, and outfitters are going to have to raise prices,” McArthur said. “It's going to be harmful across the board to guides, outfitters and customers.”



Two boats ride down the Numbers, a popular white water rafting run, in Buena Vista, Colo., May 2022 (Amanda Pampuro/Courthouse News).

Others see the industry's high turnover as inevitable: young people work a few summers, enjoy it, then move on.

"People are acting like outfitters are a bunch of cheap bastards trying to screw their guides out of a living wage," said Dennis Wied, who founded Raft Masters in 1989. "That's a bunch of bullshit."

A mechanical engineer from Florida who fell in love with the Colorado wilderness more than 30 years ago, Wied remembers surviving the high waters of 1995 and record lows of 2000. Looking at snowpack data, he anticipates a great 2022 season. Looking at inflation rates, he worries whether customers can still afford to book trips.

Outfitters like Wied, who operate on state land, are not required to follow the new federal guidelines, but he's still likely to match competitor pay.

"By significantly increasing wages, you're eroding a thin profit margin. There's only one way to compensate for that, and that's to raise prices," Wied said.

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Small businesses struggle to balance affordable prices with sustainable wages, but the outdoor industry is booming. The Bureau of Economic Analysis [estimates](#) outdoor activities contributed \$374.3 billion to national GDP in 2020. White water rafting, [categorized](#) with SCUBA diving and surfing, brought in \$5.8 million that year, double what those excursions generated in 2013.

"Really this wage conversation affects a small portion of the industry: the wilderness frontline workers," said Jenna Celmer, founder and CEO of the Basecamp Outdoor network.

A 2017 report from the Outdoor Industry Association estimated Americans spend \$887 billion on outdoor activities annually, spending only surpassed on health care and financial services. Would people spend even more if asked?

"They're paying it," Celmer said. "Most people that can afford to recreate are paying large money for gear, they're flying places, they're paying for hotels, so they can absolutely afford what would be a marginal hike in those services."

Raising ticket prices might result in fewer tips but generates a more stable income. Others recommend adding automatic gratuity to bills like in a restaurant.

"Those businesses that don't really feel like the human value is at \$15 per hour are going to see a pushback from their own clients," Celmer added. "People are voting with their wallets, and they want to support businesses that are doing good things."

Not all business owners are opposed to raising wages, however.

"My philosophy in business is you compete on quality, you don't compete on price," said Greg Kelchner, who founded Timberline Tours in 1971 after earning his master's degree in nuclear engineering.

"I'm one of the highest-priced guys in the state, but people who have been with me for 25 or 30 years come back season after season. This is not a college kid business; it's staffed by full-time year-round professionals."

Rather than state or federal minimums, Kelchner's baseline is the Department of Labor's prevailing wage. Tours in Eagle County mean starting wages at \$27.81 an hour, but Chaffee County's prevailing wage is only \$15.71. The difference, Kelchner said, is the presence of the ski industry, which raises wages for all.

"They're being crusty about a \$15 minimum wage," Kelchner said. "This whole thing made me scratch my head. Why don't you pay your people what they're worth? You'll get better people, and they'll stay year after year."



Blue rafts await tours at AVA in Buena Vista, Colo. in May 2022 (Amanda Pampuro/Courthouse News).

The 10th Circuit [issued](#) an injunction in February, staying enforcement of the wage rules through an appeal. Many outfitters still raised pay to compete in the employment market, including Duke Bradford, AVA's founder.

Comparing 2021 and 2022 pay scales, AVA raised its hourly rate from the state minimum of \$12.34 to \$15 an hour. Rates per trip remain the same for all wage groups.

"We were already going above that arbitrary \$15 an hour rate," Bradford said. "There are less people in the workforce and it affected us. It's been a real challenging time to get the staff needed to meet the public's expectations."

Bradford is fighting the federal rule largely because President Joe Biden issued it through executive order. If the measure went through the U.S. Congress, outfitters could have lobbied their elected representatives.

"If the rules were passed through a legislative process and we made our stand and lost, then we wouldn't be here," Bradford said.

Since Bradford and the Colorado River Outfitters Association led the charge,

eight states have challenged the rule in federal courts. Unlike those lawsuits, the Colorado outfitters do not have legal backing from their state.

The other thing Bradford stands to lose is overnight trips. Since it's impossible to predict how many hours a guide will actively work on a 72-hour excursion, the only easy answer is to cut the service.

"If they took overnights away, it would not take my business away, but it would take something from the outdoor community that I think's worth saving," Bradford said. "You clock out, the phones don't work, and you just enjoy yourself."

Regardless of how the courts settle the legal questions, many financial woes remain as guides, business owners and customers ride the turbulent economy in the same boat.

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