

Grand Canyon rafting impasse broken

By Mitch Tobin
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Boaters and the National Park Service have broken a logjam over management of whitewater rafting inside the Grand Canyon.

Private rafters, commercial outfitters and federal officials settled a lawsuit Thursday. They agreed to restart a contentious, 30-year-old planning process that the Park Service halted in 2000.

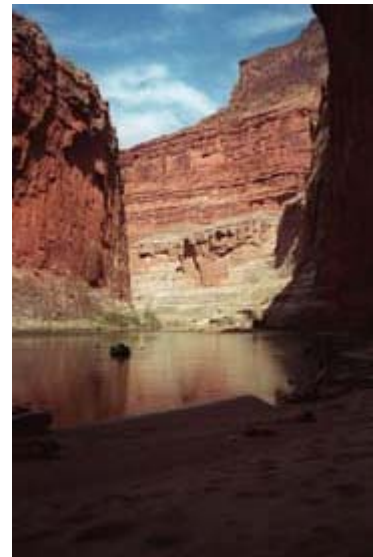
With demand for river trips far exceeding the number of permits the park issues, boating groups have clashed for decades over Colorado River issues.

Many private rafters complain they must wait 10, 15, even 20 years to float the river because about 70 percent of the 169,000 annual "user days" are given to 16 commercial outfitters.

Wilderness advocates fault the Park Service for catering to wealthy tourists and spoiling the Canyon experience by allowing motorized boats to cruise the Colorado and helicopters to ferry tourists in and out.

But commercial outfitters say most people want to take their shorter, motorized trips because they're more convenient and perceived as safer. It's the wilderness lovers, they say, who are being elitist in wanting to restrict access to the river to oar-powered boats only.

"We're looking forward to tackling longstanding issues and finding solutions," said Mark Grisham, executive director of the Grand Canyon River Outfitters Association. "It's time to move forward."



The Associated Press
Private rafters, commercial outfitters and federal officials settled a lawsuit and agreed to restart a contentious, 30-year-old planning process.

The settlement requires the Park Service to:

- Restart the planning process within 120 days and hold public meetings in Flagstaff, Phoenix, Salt Lake City and Denver.
- Re-examine the appropriate level of use on the Colorado River.
- Consider the allocation of river permits between private boaters and commercial outfitters.
- Gauge the impact of using helicopters in the Canyon and motorized craft on the river.
- Take the few unused permits issued to commercial outfitters and make them available to private boaters in the next year.
- Pay the private boaters and environmental groups who sued them \$33,063 in legal fees.

"This is definitely good news. We want to make sure everyone has a voice," said Randall Rasmussen of the National Parks Conservation Association, one of the parties that sued the Park Service.

A copy of the settlement is available online at www.gcroa.org/Pages/settlementtext.htm

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