

Canyon recreation planning revived

By ANNE MINARD

Sun Staff Reporter

01/18/2002



Jake Bacon/Arizona Daily Sun File PhotoLocal river guide Ken Baker guides the tiller of a 40 horsepower outboard motor on a commercial river trip in 1997.

After years of legal pressure from boating and environmental groups, the National Park Service has agreed to return to its work of revamping recreation along the Colorado River corridor in Grand Canyon National Park.

A settlement filed in U.S. District Court Thursday restarts planning processes for the Colorado River and surrounding land in the Grand Canyon National Park. It also clears the way for the public to help decide on the future of air tours over the Canyon and how river use will be divided between private, non-motorized boaters -- who must now wait at least 10 years for a slot on the river -- and commercial motorized rafters.

The settlement directs park personnel to oversee a public planning process for the 277 miles of the Colorado River and 1.1 million surrounding acres in the park. That process had been on hold since 1999, when former park superintendent Rob Arnberger suspended work on a revised Colorado River management plan.

At the time, Arnberger said the park's hands were tied until Congress established wilderness areas in the park. Any wilderness decision would still be in the hands of Congress -- but the Park Service doesn't need a wilderness designation to manage recreation on the river, even if it involves restrictions on motorized travel.

Park Superintendent Joe Alston said Thursday that there were also funding issues when the park was trying to address the management plan before -- but those have been resolved through an additional revenue stream from commercial outfitters, who put money into an account in lieu of franchise fees. That money has been permanently transferred to government accounts, so it can be used to fund the public input process without bias concerns, Alston said.

"I think it's a real positive thing," he said of the settlement. "I understand the frustration of my predecessor, but I look forward with some trepidation to moving forward with the process."

Plaintiffs -- including the Flagstaff-based Grand Canyon Private Boaters' Association, the National Parks Conservation Association and others -- said they sued because cutting off the negotiation process effectively cut off public input into changes in the management of the river and surrounding wilderness areas. The suit was filed in February 2000.

Shortly afterward, the Grand Canyon River Outfitters intervened to protect the interests of commercial outfitters, who want the corridor to remain open to motorized use.

People on all sides of the suit are calling Thursday's settlement a "win-win" situation.

"I think we certainly feel very good about the agreement, not only for the parties but for the public as well," said Mark Grisham, executive director of the Outfitters' Association.

Added Willie Odem, former president of the Private Boaters' Association: "The settlement is a victory for all people who care about the Grand Canyon. It allows the public to regain their voice concerning its future.

The settlement directs the park to reopen a 1989 management plan for the corridor within four months, to spell out how it will comply with the National Environmental Policy Act by 2004, and -- after it decides how to manage the corridor -- to restart revisions on a 1988 Backcountry Management Plan.

The process will include at least four public meetings -- one each in Flagstaff, Phoenix, Salt Lake City and Denver.

For the plaintiff groups and the outfitters, tough decisions about the Colorado River still lie ahead -- specifically, whether motorized boats will be allowed to remain on the Colorado River and how time on the river will be divvied up between whitewater rafters and commercial boaters.

But both groups agreed even while settlement discussions were under way that it was time to let those issues come to light.

"One of the things that led to the agreement is the sense that it's time to tackle these issues," Grisham said. "Yes, there are some difficult issues and some controversial things to deal with, but everyone feels we need to get through that."

Outfitters say they need motors to ease congestion and to give time-strapped passengers a chance to see the entire stretch of river in a week, half the time required for making the trip in an oar boat.

But representatives of other user groups say they seek a quiet experience in the Grand Canyon, far from the din of motors. They've wasted no time in campaigning for a Colorado River corridor without motorized boats.

"The impact of commercial motorized trips through the Canyon is a serious concern that affects both the availability and quality of float trips for the public," David Jenkins, a program director with the American Canoe Association, said Thursday. "We expect the Park Service to undertake an open planning process that legitimately addresses this issue and takes public sentiment into account."

Jason Robertson, access director for American Whitewater, said the settlement will give citizens "a fair shot at a self-guided wilderness-quality float trip through the Grand Canyon."

On the issue of users rights, whitewater enthusiasts have long complained that waiting lists to float or paddle the river are too long. River permits currently favor 16 commercial outfitters

with 70 percent of the permits.

"I got on a list in 1990 in graduate school," said Odem. "I didn't launch my trip until nine years later, in 2000."

He said the list is now more than twice as long as it was in 1990, "which tells me I have a 20-year wait." The growing list contains more than 6,500 names.

Grisham has said he agrees the question of use allocation is a difficult one.

"As of now, we don't believe the justification exists to re-allocate commercial days to the non-commercial sector," he said.

For now, that question will remain in the balance while the park takes its very first steps in the planning process: to determine how many users of any kind the resources along the Colorado can support.

Reporter Anne Minard can be reached at aminard@azdailysun.com or 556-2253.