

Majority of outdoor recreation businesses report layoffs, drops in revenue during pandemic

Despite economic blows, national trade association sees glimmer of hope in rising interest in outdoor activities



The 152-mile Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area qualifies as Colorado's fourth largest state park. It's also home to the most popular commercial whitewater rafting runs in the nation, including Browns Canyon, pictured here at the signature rapids known as Zoom Flume.(Scott Willoughby, The Denver Post)

By [JUDITH KOHLER](#) | **Colorado Hometown Weekly**

PUBLISHED: June 10, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. | UPDATED: June 10, 2020 at 11:10 p.m.

Outdoor recreation businesses have been hit hard during the coronavirus pandemic, from blows to manufacturing, to big drops in retail sales to the closure of parks and campgrounds, resulting in what a new national survey says has been a large number of furloughs and layoffs.

Of the businesses surveyed, 88% reported laying off or furloughing employees, according to the [Outdoor Recreation Roundtable](#), which represents 32 trade associations.

The survey, released Tuesday, also found that 94% of the businesses have seen decreased sales. About 24% reported a drop of 50% or more compared to a year ago. About 95% of the respondents have experienced a drop in revenue and 26% of those have seen revenue slide 50% or more.

Twenty-one national outdoor recreation trade associations, covering about 23,000 businesses with nearly 2 million employees, responded to the survey, done in conjunction with the [Oregon State University Outdoor Recreation Economy Initiative](#).

“It’s something that maybe not every industry has seen throughout their supply chain like we have, from the products coming in all the way through the places where people use the products being closed,” said Jessica Wahl, the roundtable’s executive director.

Manufacturing plants in Asia, where many of the products are made, shut down when the pandemic swept through that part of the world. Outdoor retailers in the U.S. then closed their doors. And state and national parks made campgrounds and other facilities off-limits or closed entirely.

[Rocky Mountain National Park](#) started a phased opening in late May after closing to the public March 20 because of coronavirus concerns. [Colorado Parks and Wildlife](#) visitor centers and offices are reopening with limited services available. Group picnic areas and playgrounds are still closed.

Outdoor recreation had been one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy, Wahl said. The [U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis](#) in the Commerce Department said outdoor recreation accounted for 2.2% — \$427.2 billion — of the gross domestic product in 2017 and grew by 3.9%, compared to 2.4% for the overall economy. Although the current situation is dire, Wahl said things she’s hearing from some of the trade associations and state agencies give her hope that outdoor businesses are “already seeing light at the end of the tunnel.” Wahl said recreation vehicle rentals and boat sales are starting to rise. State wildlife agencies are reporting increases in fishing license sales.

“What I’m hearing from businesses is that nothing will be able to undo the harm of three months of complete closures,” Wahl said.

However, outdoor recreation could be a vehicle for helping bring back the economy as state and national parks, fishing and recreation areas open up, she said. Wahl noted that it’s believed to be more difficult to transmit COVID-19 outside provided that people follow health guidelines.

The number of visits to Colorado state parks in May appear to support Wahl’s belief that with other entertainment venues still closed or limited, the great outdoors has become even more of a draw. A total of 1.9 million visits to parks statewide were logged in May, compared to 1.6 million in May 2019.

“We are seeing quite a bit of an increase at our state parks,” said Travis Duncan, Colorado Parks and Wildlife spokesman.

While he hesitated to speculate about the reason for the higher numbers, Duncan said an obvious difference from last year is that a lot of other activities have been curtailed because of the coronavirus.

While outdoor recreation can provide relief for people tired of staying at home, Wahl acknowledged that social distancing isn’t so easy in certain settings, such as raft trips or guided backcountry treks. She said the recreation roundtable is working on a set of guidelines for businesses and states.

Commercial rafting companies in Colorado are trying to get their bearings — and customers back — as they navigate the COVID-19 realities. Bill Dvorak, co-owner of Dvorak Expeditions in Nathrop, said a majority of the people who booked trips before the pandemic canceled.

“I had to refund a lot of money, which is not easy in this kind of business,” Dvorak said.

The company has reduced its staff to six employees from 12. So far, Dvorak said he’s making more money renting rafts and other equipment to people who want to go out on their own than he is on commercial trips.

“I really think at the best, we’ll have the same kind of year that we did in the droughts of 2002 and 2012. Business was off 50% then,” Dvorak said.

However, Dvorak added that he remains hopeful. The water on the Arkansas River is good, he said. And heavy, wet snow that fell in the mountains Monday should keep the water flowing nicely, he added.