

from AC-T, at: <http://www.citizen-times.com/article/20120315/OUTDOORS/303150014/Boaters-hit-Upper-Chattooga?odyssey=tab%7Ctopnews%7Ctext%7Cfrontpage>

Upper Chattooga now open to boaters

Ban had been in place since 1976

Written by
Karen Chávez

Lee Belknap longed for this day, when he wouldn't have to "sneak" a paddle trip down the wild and scenic Upper Chattooga River.

While the Hendersonville kayaker says he can no longer paddle the big, class 4-5 rapids on a river like the Chattooga, he is happy that others will now get the chance.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Forest Service announced that, after more than 35 years of being banned, kayaks, canoes and rafts will now have limited access to the churning whitewater of the Upper Chattooga River, starting Friday.

The announcement lifts a boating ban in place since 1976 on the 21-mile section of river that starts near Cashiers in Jackson County and winds through remote wilderness to the Georgia and South Carolina state lines. Boaters with permits may now float the Upper Chattooga River between Dec. 1 and April 30 when flows are at least 350 cubic feet per second at the Burrells Ford gauge during daylight hours.

"It's a shame that they're limiting boating to such a high level," said Belknap, a member of Western Carolina Paddlers. "That's going to limit the river with people with skills who could handle it at a lower level. But I'm glad to see something is happening and at least some people will get to use the river."

Boaters will need to check the river gauge and watch for storm systems, which will indicate good conditions for paddling, said Michelle Burnett, spokeswoman with the Francis Marion and Sumter national forests in South Carolina, which manage the Upper Chattooga River along with Nantahala National Forest.

The permitting system will work the same way that it does on the Lower Chattooga, where nonmotorized boating has always been permitted, Burnett said.

“Boaters will pick up self-registration permits, fill them out, put one copy in the permit box and carry the yellow copy with them to show law enforcement while they’re floating the river,” she said.

The permits, available at put-ins, are free. There are three put-in points in Nantahala National Forest.

Because the river is wild and there are no dams regulating its flow, predicting river flow and the number of boaters is tricky, Burnett said, but she estimates there might be 60-100 boaters on the river at one time.

However, Forest Service officials warn that the Chattooga is not a “starter” river. “This section of the river is not a place for most boaters,” Paul Bradley, forest supervisor for the Francis Marion and Sumter national forests, said in a statement. “Floating in this area at high, fast flows will be dangerous for people who don’t have specialized skills and experience.”

Longtime battle

The battle for access to the upper segment of the river has been a long one among the Forest Service, boaters wanting year-round access and environmentalists and anglers wanting to preserve the river’s pristine condition.

In 1976, the Forest Service issued a boating ban on the river above the Highway 28 bridge. In 2006, American Whitewater filed a lawsuit against the Forest Service, leading to numerous appeals.

Last summer, the Forest Service released an environmental assessment allowing paddling during four winter months on the Upper Chattooga during any rate of flow. Incorporating public comment, the agency in January released its final decision on river management, adding another month of boater access, but limiting it to certain flow rates.

“It’s been a long time coming,” Burnett said of the boating ban repeal. “We feel like we’ve made a solid decision, and this is just one of the steps of implementation.”

But the decision still leaves some hard feelings among many user groups.

"I am very excited about the opportunity to finally get to run the river," said Harrison Metzger, a whitewater canoeist from Mills River, who has paddled the lower Chattooga for more than 30 years.

"I doubt there is enough rain in the forecast to bring the Chattooga headwaters to the 350 cfs minimum the Forest Service requires," he said. "That flow limit seems to me an unnecessary restriction on top of the seasonal restrictions, neither of which are in place on any other river that flows across national forest land in the United States."
