

# Middle Fork trip reservations keep phone lines busy

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CHALLIS — The phones were already ringing Saturday when U.S. Forest Service workers arrived at the Middle Fork Ranger Station around 7 a.m. "Let them ring," someone said as the

seven workers set up folding furniture, started the coffee and taped a giant calendar to the wall.

Calls would not be accepted until precisely 8 a.m. under a new system of taking reservations for summer float trips on the pristine Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

The Middle Fork Ranger District permits only seven boat launches per day from June 1 through Labor Day. According to District River Manager Ted Anderson, that rule went into effect in 1973 when the district started a federally-mandated river management plan. About half that number of launches —

commonly called the river's "carrying capacity" — are assigned in advance to commercial outfitters. The other half go to private parties, who begin calling in their request dates at a specific, well-publicized time, he said.

#### Ten hours of answering

At 8 a.m. Saturday, the time had come. "Middle Fork, your date please?" said three female voices, almost in unison. Middle Fork resource clerk Diana Atwood and business assistants Noreen Monte and Toni Sullivan bravely took the first shift in what was to be 10 hours of almost ceaseless phone answering. Sheri Johnson, a summer field worker in the Middle Fork District, also volunteered her services, while forester Cliff Mitchell penned the names of the successful callers on the calendar.

"This is the first year we've tried this system," said District Ranger Ray Cullinane, while helping to direct communications in the bustling ranger station.

In past years reservations were granted through a random computer lottery. Requests were accepted throughout January, and the winners would be notified in April. Usually almost 3,000 applicants would submit requests for the available launch dates, less than 400.

#### Slow and expensive

That system was abandoned because it was slow and expensive, according to Cullinane. "It took us forever to key-punch all those cards and make sure we didn't have a mistake," he said. "This way they know right away if they've got a date."

By 9 a.m. Saturday more than 100 launch dates were taken. About one-third of the first 100 were from Idaho residents, including a good percentage from Challis. Nineteen dates, most of them in July, were filled after one hour. Mid-summer

dates are most desirable because of warm weather and high waters, according to Anderson.

By 10 a.m. the entire month of July was taken. Calls had been accepted from states as far away as Georgia. The phone calls began taking longer as callers began jockeying for the remaining dates, trying to fit them into their summer plans and vacation schedules.

The first caller to hang up without taking one of the available spots did so at 11 a.m.

#### All dates taken

By 2 p.m. all the dates were taken — even those in early June, when the weather can be so chilly and the waters so high that float trips sometimes have to be cancelled. The receptionists spent the rest of Saturday and all Sunday disappointing callers with the sad news. A plan for reassigning cancelled launch dates throughout the summer was explained in detail to the callers.

The new call-in system met mixed reviews from reservation seekers who were questioned later. "I guess you're never going to find a completely fair system and I guess this is about as good as you're going to get," said Dennis Kirkland of Kent, Wash. Kirkland, whose call was among the first few received by the ranger station, said "obviously I'm happy because I got through. But I've got friends who tried all day and all they got was a recorded message saying the circuits were busy."

Kirkland said making the reservation process too easy encourages requests from floaters who are less than serious about making the trip. He added that a more equitable system might be like one used in Arizona. To allocate reservations for Colorado River trips in the Grand Can-

yon, a list of names is constantly updated, and every floater is eventually given a launch date on the river. He might have to wait several years before his number comes up.

Jim Comer of Niwot, Colo., said he began trying to call the Middle Fork station at 7:30 a.m. "I was getting the intercept for 'circuits busy — hang up, try again.' So I started calling a little later. I've got a repeat dialer phone, and I finally got through after an hour."

Comer says he too has friends who couldn't get through. "I think for anybody to have to sit there and dial for an hour, let alone a whole day, it's kind of a waste of time," he said.

Comer said out-of-towners may be at a disadvantage, compared with local callers because of overloaded long distance telephone circuits.

#### System to be analyzed

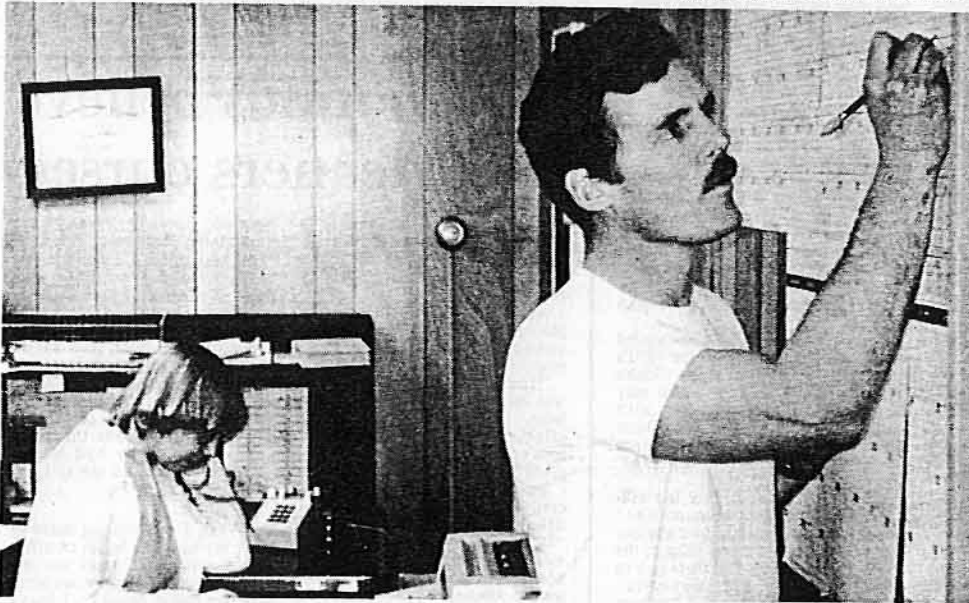
Anderson said the results of the call-in system will be analyzed in the near future, partly to determine whether the out-of-town distribution has changed from previous years.

As might be expected, most of the successful reservation seekers expressed satisfaction with the new system and were happy about receiving their float dates. Some were jubilant.

"She started screaming before I could even get her name," reported receptionist Toni Sullivan on one occasion. Another caller said, "it's so nice to hear a voice after hearing a busy signal for so long." Ms. Atwood said.

Noreen Monte was pleasantly surprised to take a reservation request from her husband Duane about 9 a.m.

Everyone was surprised by a Colorado caller, who said he was phoning from a mobile telephone in his car.



Cliff Mitchell and Noreen Monte take reservations for Middle Fork summer float trips.