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22 water releases set for Lehigh

Fast-moving river boosts Carbon County tourism, agency says.

By Ashley Kosciolk

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The Army Corps of Engineers is planning 22 whitewater releases on the Lehigh River this summer to aid rafting conditions.

For a water release, the Corps allows water to build up at the Francis E. Walter Dam in Luzerne County. When it's released on planned dates, the river level rises to makes conditions safer and faster for rafting.

The releases translate into tourism dollars, according to the Pocono Mountain Vacation Bureau. Each release day draws about 6,200 visitors to the area, generating roughly \$2.28 million for local hotels, restaurants, gas stations, retail shops and other businesses, the bureau said.

"They usually go well," said Corps spokesman Khaalid Walls.

People can comment on this year's plan at a workshop at 7-9 p.m. Thursday at Mountain Laurel Resort in White Haven.

The workshop is being held by the Corps, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the Delaware River Basin Commission

The workshop will include a presentation on prior releases, discussion on the 2008 plan and a question-and-answer session.

Walls said the Corps hopes to have the release schedule completed by mid-February.

In the past few years, the agency has held more water back at the dam to help the releases.

It raised the amount of water it holds back by 30 feet to 1,330 feet in 2005 to enhance downstream recreation on the Lehigh. But a dry summer that year forced the cancellation of almost half of the 22 planned releases.

In 2006, the Corps raised the reservoir level to 1,365 feet. That additional water, combined with heavier-than-normal rainfall throughout the summer, allowed the agency to go ahead with all 22 scheduled whitewater releases and also add two weekends in October 2006.

The Corps held 22 releases in May through September last year, but cancelled two tentative releases it was considering having in October because of dry conditions.

Walls said 750 to 1,000 cubic feet of water flows every second on release days, and releases are usually done over a 12-hour period -- generally 1 a.m. to 1 p.m.

"They're a real blessing," said Ken Powley, owner of Whitewater Challengers in White Haven, who noted that the Lehigh is at its highest in the spring after snow melts, leaving water levels low during peak summer months without the help of the releases.

"We've been here for 33 years, and for the first 31 of those years, you had to choose between either great rapids when it was cold or very mellow rapids when it was warm."

Powley, who said about 5,000 to 6,000 people have already made rafting reservations, anticipates another booming season.

"The last two seasons have just been crazy," Powley said.

Ashley Kosciolik is a freelance writer.

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