

Opinion: Setting the facts straight about rafters

By Nate Rangel

Twenty-three years ago, back in 1994, Bernard Carlson filed suit against El Dorado County and the permitted professional outfitters on the South Fork of the American River. He claimed that the granting of permits, under existing law which protects the environment, the community and local taxpayers, was a discretionary act and that the then existing River Management Plan and accompanying EIR was deficient. It turned out that he was right, and as part of the settlement that the county and my colleagues reached with him we engaged in what became an extensive seven-year process which resulted in a new management plan, along with a comprehensive and all-encompassing EIR. That management plan, backed up by its EIR, is the current “general plan” for the South Fork of the American.

Larry Weitzman, in his **July 31 opinion** piece titled “Rafting companies need to pay to play”, seems to have just discovered river recreation in El Dorado County. His list of grievances and alleged taxpayer subsidies are all matters that were dealt with and satisfactorily mitigated within that plan. In reality, Weitzman is a couple of decades late to the party and appears to have jumped on the “alternative facts” bandwagon. Or, put another way, he doesn’t know what he’s writing about.

He starts his list of complaints by discussing the huge burden that we pose on county search and rescue operations, and he backs that up with the one incident he was able to find – the tragic disappearance of a non-rafter on the Cosumnes River. It’s puzzling how that single event on another river bears any relationship to our operations here, but I’m sure Weitzman has it all figured out in his mind.

He then goes on to boldly claim that “taxpayers are spending about \$30,000 a year on a bus shuttle, purely to benefit the commercial rafting industry.” Again, he’s more than a bit fact challenged on this one. The shuttles he’s talking about are partially paid for by DMV registration fees specifically earmarked for pollution fighting programs such as this. They come via grants from the local Air Quality Management board that help satisfy traffic mitigation requirements within the existing Management Plan for private boaters. They utilize vehicles and trailers that were partially paid for by funds from the county’s River Trust Fund (the dollars that commercial outfitters pay to the county) and – here’s the best part – none of those shuttles, nor any of the dollars spent on them, is used by the commercial rafting industry. Nada ... zilch ... zero ... not one red cent.

Weitzman proceeds to expose the “potential slush fund” that the River Trust fund represents. According to him it pays for one single county employee which is – guess what – completely wrong. Those monies fund the entire river management program which includes one river recreation supervisor, two assistants, and other staff within the Parks Division, including the parks manager, to the degree that their time is allocated to river recreation issues. He decries as insufficient the dollars that outfitters spend toward our activities citing only the user-day fees paid to the county. He neglected to mention the put-in and take-out fees that we pay for use of Henningsen- Lotus Park, the fees paid to State Parks for use of Marshall Gold as well as the take-out at Folsom Reservoir, the dollars paid for lunch use at Cronin Ranch, a BLM managed resource. Or the money we spend annually in property taxes for our equipment to the county, or the county’s possessory interest tax we spend yearly based on our permits or the dollars we pay to get an environmental health permit so that we can feed our guests meals. The list goes on and on. The bottom line is we do pay to play, and we pay big time.

Finally, Weitzman accuses the rafters of wanting, through the auspices of the River Management Advisory Committee, to “tell the county how to run the river concessions. Isn’t that the tail wagging the dog?” I can only suppose that’s because we have one single commercial outfitter representative on RMAC. The fact that the RMAC is only an advisory to the Board of Supervisors and consists of six other appointed positions representing private landowners, State Parks, local businesses, one private boater and two at-large seats seems to have escaped him. But, again, in Weitzman’s world somehow our one vote is “wagging” that dog.

Weitzman’s headline alleging our failing to “Pay to play” is ironically accurate only in that he has failed to pay the price of being a legitimate journalist. His entire hit-piece is replete with lies, half-truths and irresponsible allegations with no basis in reality. The next time Weitzman goes trolling for a new crusade I’d suggest he pick a battle that wasn’t previously waged 20 years earlier, that he do his homework and that he get his facts straight.

Nate Rangel is a local resident and professional river outfitter. He is the current appointed outfitter representative on the El Dorado County River Management Advisory Committee.