

## Festival stays afloat for its second year

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While summer may seem like the natural time to float along the river, February is the chosen month for a group of white water enthusiasts.

Over 300 people are expected to attend BoatSmith Whitewater Festival in Gasquet on Feb. 14 to 17 for the second year of bringing the boating community together. This year, they will officially be hosting races.

With full-body wetsuits and inflatable boats, outdoor adventurers will pile into Smith River, navigating rapids and racing downstream. BoatSmith, one of many boating festivals in the U.S., offers experienced boaters an opportunity to gather for floating events, all while enjoying the serenity of the Smith River.

“It’s not just about an adrenaline rush. It’s more about experiencing the river. You know, there’s a lot more than just the whitewater itself. There’s the vegetation on the sides of the river... there’s waterfalls coming in. It’s beautiful,” said Aaron Babcock, a resident of Williams, Ore. and one of the planners.

Boaters will participate in two downriver races, a mass float, meals at Patrick Creek Lodge and a viewing of nature-themed films. This event serves more than just water enthusiasts. It is a fundraiser for the Gasquet

Mountain School.

“I and our other planners thought that we want to involve the younger kids in protecting the resources we have and just showing them what actually they’re living around... Raise the money to get them outdoors, whether on the river or on the trail in the forest,” Babcock said.

Babcock and Gasquet resident Adam Spencer conceived the idea for the festival last year. Both having a love for the Smith River, they wanted to highlight the area. After seeing a turnout of around 300 people, they decided to host it again this year.

“The boating community, especially the whitewater [community], are really responsible, support safe boating practices, and bringing an event here kind of brings more awareness to this area. A lot of people outside don’t know much about the Smith,” Babcock said.

Additionally, the event boosts local business sales, as Patrick Creek Lodge and the Hiouchi Cafe experienced a spike in business last year.

Planning a boating festival is no easy task. Beginning in November, Babcock and the other planners began sorting the details, such as securing their 15 sponsors. Some of their largest support came from the Six Rivers National Forest, which helped them secure permits and other such logistics.

“This event is made possible by them. [We’ve been] Working with them very closely. They put forth a lot of resources to let it happen again,” Babcock said.

The biggest concern for the planners is safety, according to Babcock. Last year went smoothly with no major injuries, but there is always the chance that boaters will try to take on the activity unprepared. Babcock encourages people to be smart and make safety a priority during the festival.