



NEWS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Middle Fork, Salmon River outfitters in search of new backcountry bus service

STANLEY, Idaho – (Jan. 3, 2023) - Middle Fork and Salmon River outfitters are searching for a new backcountry bus service to take over operations after learning that Caldwell Transportation Company is discontinuing service after two decades.

“My wife and I spent 21 summers in Stanley, raised three kids, loved living in the mountains, and ran the business. We just decided it was time,” says Mike Stephenson of Caldwell Transportation. “However, we will continue to focus on our core transportation business in the Treasure Valley.”

A new bus service is needed to shuttle thousands of river runners to key access points on the nationally famous Middle Fork Salmon River and *River of No Return* section of the Salmon River, both of which cut through the 2.3-million Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.

“There’s 40 river businesses trying to figure out what they’re going to do next summer,” says Steve Zettel, owner of Idaho Wilderness Company, a Middle Fork outfitter, based in Challis, Idaho. “We see this as a business opportunity for an existing bus or transportation company that might want to expand to Stanley, Idaho.”

The exit of Caldwell Transportation leaves a troublesome void for Middle Fork and Salmon River outfitters, who take about 10,000 people a year on deluxe week-long wilderness whitewater rafting trips. Private float parties also will face challenges finding shuttle services without a new transportation company stepping in, officials said.

At the beginning and conclusion of each trip, bus/shuttle services are needed to drop off and pick up customers. Caldwell Transportation had eight buses running a day for a core 90-day season that often extended into 120 days.

“We see this as a business opportunity,” Zettel says, “but amateurs need not apply. It’s going to take a real solid enterprise to pull it off. The access routes are rough roads, so you need solid vehicles that can take the abuse, you need safe, alert drivers, you need people who are going to show up for work every day.

“The complicated road logistics and multiple river put-ins and take-outs require a steady hand overseeing the shuttle drivers to make sure the right vehicles are left at the right location.”

Despite the challenges, “I think there’s money to be made,” said Dustin Aherin, owner of Idaho River Adventures, a Middle Fork and Main Salmon outfitter. “We think it would make the most sense if an existing bus company were to expand an existing fleet to take on the Salmon River float business.”

The transportation side of the Middle Fork and Salmon River businesses – plus the needs of private do-it-yourself boaters who are running those rivers – is a big deal. The shuttles are a pivotal part of the whole river logistics operation. Because both the Middle Fork and Salmon River trips cut through wilderness, the only road access is at the beginning and end of the river trip.

Absent a shuttle company, floaters or river outfitters would have to drive their own shuttle. A few of the outfitters have their own buses. But most of them don’t.

Transportation service is needed to the following river launch points:

1. Boundary Creek launch point on the 100-mile Middle Fork. 25 miles of single-lane dirt road. Nearest town: Stanley.
2. Corn Creek launch point on the 80-mile Salmon River, *River of No Return* section. Corn Creek is 40 miles from U.S. 93 on the Salmon River Road. The drive features 25 miles of dirt road. Nearest town: Salmon.
3. Cache Bar takeout, the end of the trip for Middle Fork floaters. Cache Bar also is accessed via the Salmon River Road, 33 miles from North Fork. The drive features 20 miles of dirt road. Nearest town: Salmon.

Regardless of the outcome of a search for a transportation company, river guests should rest assured that the outfitters involved will have a professional resolution for their shuttle needs well before the river season gets here, Zettel said.

If anyone has an interest in learning more about this opportunity, contact Colin Hughes at Hughes River Expeditions in Lolo, Montana. colin@hughesriver.com

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