

# Big Bend sees river drying up

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For the first time in a half-century, the Rio Grande has ceased to flow through Big Bend National Park, causing officials there to wring their hands and forcing rafting outfitters to abandon traditional canyons.

"We did some checking, and the old-timers recall that back in the '50s during the drought it stopped flowing," said David Elkowitz, a park spokesman.

"The '90s were very dry, and ... with the low rainfall in Mexico and Colorado this winter, (that has) combined to give us what we have now," Elkowitz said.

Though springs and occasional rises have kept some areas flowing in the park, in other stretches the river is a series of stagnant pools separated by stretches of dry gravel.

Park officials fear the dry conditions will wreak havoc on fish and other aquatic creatures, besides harming the region's water sports businesses.

In Lajitas, upriver from the park, there was still a tiny flow.

"You can skip across it. It's pretty sad. It's no longer the mighty Rio Grande as was seen in the John Wayne movies," said Rick Page, owner of the Lajitas Trading Post.

"I've been here since 1972, and this is the lowest I've ever seen it," he said.

For Jan Forte, owner of Big Bend River Tours in Study Butte, the dry conditions have eliminated rafting in all but one canyon downriver of the park.

"Normally, we have Colorado Canyon, Elena, Marisacal, Boquillas and Temple, and the lower canyon. Out of all of those, we can only use Temple," she said.

"We're trying to convert people to other things such as hiking trips or interpretive tours of the national park," she said.