

Thermopolis pool operator steams over hot springs water

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THERMOPOLIS -- A concession manager at Hot Springs State Park says the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources isn't doing such a hot job of supplying water to his pools, tubs and steam room.

Roland Luehne complains that the state has been stingy with the hot-water tap. He says that has made keeping his pools clean and steamy-warm a constant struggle.

"We've never had so many problems until recently. It's just one thing after another," said Luehne, whose family has owned the Star Plunge pools and water slides concession since 1975.

Luehne said he drains his outdoor pool for cleaning one evening a week. Lately, however, he hasn't had enough constant water flow to completely refill the pool in time for the next morning's opening. Some days after a cleaning, he said, the pool has needed as much as 3 more feet of water at opening time, 9 a.m., and hasn't completely filled up until noon.

He also said he doesn't get enough hot water to keep up temperatures the way he'd like.

"Our hot tubs and our vapor cave, we've been getting a lot of complaints about it, saying it's not as hot as it was a year ago," Luehne said. "It's not good for business."

State officials counter that there should be no problems because Star Plunge has been getting exactly as much hot water as always.

"We disagree that they're not getting enough water," said Milward Simpson, director of the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources.

Hot Springs State Park is by far Wyoming's most popular state park, drawing an estimated 1 million visitors a year. The heart of the park is the Big Spring, which feeds the soaking pools and several natural hot pools.

The park has a free hot pool and two pay-to-enter concessions -- Star Plunge and Tepee Pools -- with hot pools, hot tubs and water slides. Two hotels in the park also use hot spring water.

Luehne said his problems began last year, after the state in 2006 completed a \$3 million project to lessen health risks at the concessions. The new system uses cool water from the nearby Bighorn River to help cool the hot water.

Previously the park cooled the spring water -- from around 127 degrees to a more bearable 104 -- by mixing it with water from cooling ponds.

Problem was, waterfowl and pets sometimes swam there.

"There could be fecal matter from animals in those open pools," Simpson said. "So the reason that the state invested \$3 million was to correct this problem and provide cleaner, safer, better water -- which is to the very significant benefit not only of the concessionaires that operate their pools out there, but also for the hotels that are there."

Luehne said the project was a good idea.

"The whole thing is a good thing. But the bad part of it is ... they didn't research it as well as they could have," Luehne said.

"Since they put it in, it's been kind of a nightmare for both pools," he added, referring to his own concession as well as the Tepee Pools.

But Simpson said the contractor who built the new system measured the concessionaires' hot water supply before and after the project and found no difference.

"Both pools are getting the maximum amounts that the system was designed to deliver and those amounts are consistent with the amounts he received previously," Simpson said.

He said park staff have responded to the concessionaires' complaints about not having enough water and have found

that the concessionaires themselves were responsible.

"Their pools aren't filling because their drains aren't shut or their valves aren't open all of the way. And that's been a pattern," Simpson said.

The owner of the Tepee Pools, Bill Moriarity, declined to comment in detail.

"We're attempting to work the problem out with the state and don't feel compelled to have a public comment at this time," Moriarity said.

Simpson said Star Plunge and the Tepee Pools are renegotiating their state leases. Simpson said the concessions have paid the state 1 percent of their gross annual revenues, which works out to about \$3,700 a year for Star Plunge and \$4,100 a year for the Tepee Pools.

The managers of the park's two hotels, Holiday Inn of the Water and Best Western The Plaza Hotel, said they haven't had recurring problems with getting hot water.