



## **Written Testimony in Support of Appropriations to Inventory, Preserve, Maintain and Create Recreational and Backcountry Airstrips**

Submitted by Craig L. McCullough  
The Recreational Aviation Foundation, Maryland State Liaison

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies

April 16, 2013

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Recreational Aviation Foundation on the importance of protecting recreational and backcountry airstrips.

The Recreational Aviation Foundation (“RAF”) is a nationwide, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization with membership in all 50 States and the District of Columbia. We are dedicated to preserving, maintaining and creating public use recreational and backcountry airstrips. We come before you today to respectfully request that the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies acknowledge the importance of recreational and backcountry airstrips and appropriate funding dedicated to the inventorying and protection of these national treasures.

### **Recreational and Backcountry Airstrips Must Be Protected**

#### **Serve as Trail Heads with Minimal Impact to the Environment**

Public recreational lands and national parks revitalize communities, preserve local history, celebrate local heritage, and create opportunities for children and families to get outside, be active, and have fun.<sup>1</sup> In many instances, primitive airstrips exist within and around the boundaries of these public recreational lands.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, “aircraft have been flying into remote landing strips in the mountains of Idaho for over 50 years, and the Central Idaho

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/aboutus/index.htm> (April 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Examples include the Frank Church Wilderness in Idaho, Meadow Creek and Schafer Meadows in Montana, Death Valley National Park in California and many others.

Wilderness Act allowed this use to continue.”<sup>3</sup> These airstrips allow easy access for recreational activities, take up very little land, and cause minimal to no impact to the environment as compared to roads or trails. Also, unlike vehicular trails, airstrips maintain their vegetative cover because, aircraft are incapable of spinning their wheels, churning up hillsides, and otherwise tearing up the landscape. Once an aircraft rolls to a stop it remains in one place and the occupants are now hikers accessing public lands.

### Provide Quick Access to Remote Areas for Emergency Personnel

As published in the Congressional Record on 7/12/01, U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton, wrote a letter to U.S. Senator Mike Crapo of Idaho, confirming:

*“Our Nation’s backcountry airstrips are important to many activities that take place on our public lands. Airstrips provide remote access for aerial firefighting efforts, they are essential safety tools for pilots operating in rural and mountainous areas, and they provide a vital link to the outside world for many rural communities. It is important to ensure that legitimate uses of backcountry airstrips are protected.”*

Verification of the value of these assets was further demonstrated by the comments of Abigail Kimball, Chief of the United States Forest Service when on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009, she wrote in part:

*“Aviation has been part of our country’s heritage, both as a mode of transportation and as a means of access to remote and scenic areas for a wide variety of purposes. Backcountry airstrips are an appropriate use of National Forest System (NFS) lands as they provide enhanced access for a variety of legitimate recreational activities and serve recreational pilots. Providing and maintaining backcountry airstrips enhance the spectrum of recreational uses of NFS lands. Providing backcountry airstrips serves recreationists who care deeply about use and enjoyment of NFS lands, both now and in the future. Recreation aircraft and backcountry airstrips can be an integral part of a balanced and efficient transportation system.”<sup>4</sup>*

### Increase Tourism and Support the Local Economy

A piece of property that was gifted to the RAF, known as Ryan Field, is a 2,500 foot grass airstrip on 152 acres of timbered land, surrounded by United States Forest Service lands near West Glacier, Montana. Since 2004, RAF volunteers have removed encroaching trees, leveled the runway, cleared and seeded ground for camping areas, installed tie-downs, erected a second windsock, built a 24’X30’ camping shelter, built a masonry BBQ, installed

---

<sup>3</sup> “A User’s Guide Frank Church—River Of No Return Wilderness,” U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, (Dec. 2001), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Memo from Abigail R. Kimbell, Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, to Regional Foresters, Station Directors, Area Director, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs and WO Directors, (File Code 1900/2300/5100/5300/5400/7700), (July 2, 2009).

runway marker cones and put in a handicapped accessible toilet. Ongoing projects at Ryan Field include forestry management involving tree thinning, clearing the outside property line of dead and downed trees, gopher and weed control and marking and maintaining a one mile hiking trail to Glacier National Park. If it were not for the volunteer efforts and monetary contributions of RAF members, the grass airstrip at Ryan Field would likely be overgrown and inaccessible. Today, however, it serves as a wonderful trailhead into West Glacier and a benefit to the local economy as visitors avail themselves of local attractions and amenities such as lodging, rental cars, adventure company services and dining.

The Russian Flat public airstrip in the Lewis and Clark National Forest, located in central Montana, is a testament to the power of collaboration between private individuals and State and Federal officials. The Russian Flat airstrip is the first new airstrip on US Forest Service Land in at least 45 years. The airstrip is the result of a partnership between the RAF, the Montana Pilots Association, and the Lewis and Clark National Forest. The Montana Pilots Association provided all of the volunteer labor for the airstrip construction. The RAF provided the funding for the airstrip. Century Companies of Lewistown, MT donated labor and equipment. The airstrip came about because pilots were invited to participate in the Travel Planning process for the Lewis and Clark National Forest. The Travel Planning process started in 2003 and the Travel Plan with an approved airstrip was put into effect in 2007. The construction was started in 2008 and the airstrip was opened to the public on August 20, 2010. Since that time, tourism to the Lewis and Clark National Forest has seen a healthy increase as pilots and non-pilots alike have taken advantage of the enhanced accessibility to hiking, fishing and conservationist efforts within the Lewis and Clark National Forest through the Russian Flat airstrip.

The Grapevine Airstrip on the Tonto Basin Ranger District in the Tonto National Forest of Arizona provides low impact access to part of the 2.8 million acres of the Tonto National Forest. The lands are managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Through the combined efforts of USDA personnel, the Arizona Pilot's Association and the RAF, the Grapevine Airstrip was repaired and is now maintained at a level that enhances visits to the national park. Volunteers also assisted in upgrading the Audio/Visual equipment at the Roosevelt Lake Visitors Center, improving the educational programs for the thousands of visitors the USDA receives there each year.<sup>5</sup>

Recreational and backcountry airstrips must be protected. They serve as trail heads with minimal impact to the environment, provide quick access to remote areas for emergency personnel, increase tourism and support local economies. Unfortunately, we can only protect what we know exists.

---

<sup>5</sup> See March 29, 2013 Letter from Kelly L. Jardine, USDA District Ranger, to Mark Spencer, AZ Pilot's Assoc., Pres. stating "Your personal efforts in the fore mentioned services are not only a commendation, but also a recommendation to any public entity to avail themselves of the assistance provided by the AZ Pilot's Association and the RAF."

## To Protect These National Assets They Must Be Inventoried

The United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Asset Management: A Best Practices Guide*, EPA 816-F-08-014 (April 2008), explains:

*“The first step in managing your assets is knowing their current state.... Best practices include:*

**• *Preparing an asset inventory and system map....”***  
*(emphasis added).*

The majority of recreational and backcountry airstrips in existence today are not widely known, nor are they a high priority to the public land managers that have these resources in their jurisdiction. Accordingly, they are falling into disrepair and are being repurposed for efforts other than what they were intended. Once an airstrip is lost, it is likely lost forever. We are losing recreational and backcountry airstrips each year, simply because their existence is not formally acknowledged. Accordingly, it is imperative that we create an accurate inventory of such airstrips as soon as possible.<sup>6</sup>

### Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran and Members of the Subcommittee, prior to the RAF, no group was entirely dedicated to the preservation, maintenance and creation of backcountry airstrips on public lands. Over the last ten-years, the RAF through its members and partners has raised awareness of the importance of these airstrips at the national, state and local level. Through a nearly 100% volunteer effort, the RAF has successfully protected a number of existing airstrips and created the first new airstrip on U.S. Forest Service Land in at least 45 years. Existence of these backcountry airstrips benefits all Americans by providing environmentally low impact access, education and activity in and around our public lands. Adequate protection, however, can only come with an appropriation to generate an accurate inventory and then support preservation efforts. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee.

---

<sup>6</sup> In 2009, administrative units within the U.S. Forest Service were directed to include in their program of work “(1)...an inventory of backcountry airstrips under Forest Service jurisdiction, regardless of prior ownership and (2) listing of these facilities on the Forest Transportation Atlas....”, See *fn. 4, Memo from Abigail R. Kimbell*. To date, no such inventory has been created.