



**Testimony presented by The Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF)
Backcountry & Recreational Airstrips on Federal Lands Including
BLM, USFS and NPS, Policies and Funding
March 18, 2015**

Submitted by Mr. John McKenna, President

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, 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.

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 protection and maintenance of these national treasures.

Backcountry aviation is important and unique to the American experience. Beginning in the early 20th century, trails were built, telephone lines were hung, fires were fought, people rescued, and supplies were replenished, and even early tourism gained its first access utilizing aircraft in the backcountry. By the 1960's public land planners began focusing on recreation, and wilderness designations. While in some wilderness areas, airstrips were grandfathered and remain an important low impact method of access today, many other airstrips would fall out of the planning process. By the 90's airstrip closures by land managers were becoming common and for a myriad of reasons, but generally for a lack of maintenance funding, work load, perceived lack of use, and misunderstood risks. Nevertheless, today's remaining airstrips continue to play an important role as internal trail heads and access points for more common recreational activities, such as camping, hiking, and fishing. There has also been a resurgence of interest in backcountry aviation across the country, and several new manufacturers focus on this growing market. Unlike other methods of access to public lands, aircraft require only a small foot print, perhaps a 1000' to 2000' clearing, and are seen or heard but for a few moments. We like to say that aviation is the only mode that needs no road. Pilots and their passengers are not only a viable user of the forest, but a large economic driver to the surrounding communities. A 2008 study in Idaho showed that of the 1.4 million visitors who arrived in that state via the studied airports, (many of which are the airstrips we speak of) more than 400,000 arrived in general aviation aircraft⁽¹⁾. Backcountry airstrips serve other critical needs as well, for example, emergency access in firefighting, medical emergencies, and emergency landings.

The trend of declining airstrip numbers concerned many aviators, and the Recreational Aviation Foundation was born out of this concern with a mission of keeping the legacy of recreational aviation strong by preserving, maintaining, and creating public use

recreational and backcountry airstrips nationwide. Some 11 years ago, the RAF began working with local aviation organizations and land managers to understand the issues and provide support to both. The RAF has since become one of the largest aviation organizations, and along with state based organizations, has become a willing and effective partner with public land managers, participating in airstrip planning, policy, and volunteer efforts across the country. The RAF has members in every state and 14 countries.

The first efforts of the RAF involved defining the issues, real or perceived, that land managers experienced with airstrips on their respective lands. We learned that, in many cases, a lack of familiarity with aviation and, in particular, recreational aviation was a significant problem. For example, some land managers felt that liability was a major issue, when in fact no federal land manager had ever experienced a lawsuit related to backcountry airstrips⁽²⁾. Nevertheless, the RAF set out on a campaign to amend the Recreational Use Statutes in all 50 states by adding aviation as an activity for which land managers enjoy immunity. This has been accomplished in 25 states to date, including nearly every western state.

Another area of concern, and perhaps the most relevant and pressing, is the simple lack of funding for maintenance of these airstrips. With the funding/maintenance issues currently standing out as the primary challenge to airstrips, we studied the areas where airstrips remained active and a part of the planning process, and discovered that the primary enabling factor was the public private partnerships that had grown up around these airstrips. It became obvious that collaboration would be the best approach to the challenge of airstrip maintenance. In states such as Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Arizona, where strong partnerships exist, many airstrips in the current FS inventory are considered active and a part of FS planning, several even being re-opened after decades of closure. Contrast this with other states or forest regions where there is little partnering, and we find few airstrips that are managed or maintained. The second scenario has led to another issue, that being a lack of knowledge of any existing airstrips in these areas. After testimony given by the RAF before this committee on April 16th, 2013, this committee became instrumental in supporting the recent effort by the USFS in developing an actual inventory of airstrips on its lands. Through cooperation, this inventory has been updated and currently identifies 103 airstrips on FS lands. It is probable that many more exist, but have been left unidentified due to previous closures, the resulting lack of use, and the effects of time. Of these 103 airstrips identified, approximately 45 are considered a part of a FS management plan⁽³⁾.

In the past, it could be said, the FS would plan, build, and maintain the road, but this approach is giving way to a new model. Recognizing the limitations of the old system, the new model encourages users to take part in the activities that were traditionally performed entirely by the land managers. Both the USFS and BLM have entered into a Memo of Understanding with the RAF encouraging collaboration, but tight are hampering progress and even forcing otherwise willing land managers to say no to the assistance offered through the private sector.

Limitations in funding often result in fewer human resources available to implement and manage volunteer partner agreements. By necessity, land managers must focus on only a portion of the opportunities available to them through willing private partners. Not only do we see this effect on the current inventory of FS airstrips, with so few airstrips being managed through such partnerships, but also in many other areas, such as the degradation and closure of historic sites, camp grounds, etc. Programs such as the Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act (FLREA) have become a critical enabling component of sustainable, developed recreation sites. The majority of backcountry airstrips, however, are unimproved, remote, and even primitive, and thus not appropriate for FLREA. Other public/private partnering mechanisms do exist and have been successfully used at backcountry airstrips, for example, the Challenge Cost Share Agreement, or other simple volunteer agreements. As stated earlier, current funding levels have left land managers with insufficient capacity to accept our help in many cases, as well as that of other willing private partners.

There is no doubt that this committee hears many requests for new or increased funding, but in this model, increased funding to land managers is *leveraged and multiplied* through private resources, both in manpower and financial donations, made available to them through the new public/private partnerships. This approach also promotes a more involved public, whose care for a particular asset or project, such as an airstrip, historical site, or wilderness area, brings a myriad of intangible benefits that come when there's "skin in the game" from the user. We believe that since money spent on collaborative projects is leveraged through public/private partnerships, this is one of the most efficient models, worthy of consideration and funding.

Perhaps a few current examples would be helpful:

On the Tonto National Forest in Arizona, there lies an airstrip known as Grapevine that was constructed in the early 1950's. The airstrip was originally dirt and utilized by both the FS and recreators for several decades. In 1989 the Bureau of Reclamation took on the ambitious project of raising the Roosevelt Lake Dam by 77 feet. In support this project reconstruction and paving of this airstrip was included early on. This overall project was completed in 1997 at a cost of around \$430 million dollars, which included the newly paved airstrip. Also included was the construction of multiple campsites around the lake, which is the largest body of water in central Arizona.

That same year the airstrip was closed, the FS citing a lack of funds for maintenance. Unfortunately, this multi-million dollar asset sat unused and deteriorating for the next 15 years, except for a handful of emergency landings, some made by aircraft on approach to the Phoenix area airports. By 2005, the tree growth through cracks in the runway and along its edges made the airstrip unusable, even for emergency use.

In 2011, the RAF and the Arizona Pilot's Association began working with the USFS on another airstrip, the only air access to the local community of Young, Arizona. This effort went so well that nearby district rangers took notice and began discussing the possibilities of bringing their airstrips back into safe and usable condition, including the

Grapevine airstrip. After discussions and preliminary goals being established in 2012, some 80 volunteers showed up for three days, clearing the overgrowth by hand and repairing areas of asphalt deterioration. Since then, local pilot volunteers have continued to maintain this airstrip, and through cooperation with the district, have had a monthly fly in camp and BBQ at the airstrip. Fire rings, cooking grates, and even donated picnic tables have been installed entirely by volunteers. The most recent weekend drew 25 aircraft with visitors from across the country, as far away as Pennsylvania and Montana. Last year this airstrip provided a safe landing area for an Air Force Blackhawk helicopter after losing its controls. Both Grapevine and the airstrip in Young have been utilized in firefighting and/or military training exercises since being restored to a safe and usable condition.

In Utah last year, several aviation organizations, along with support from the BLM and the local county, performed long overdue maintenance at the Mexican Mountain airstrip located in the Mexican Mountain Wilderness Study Area. A great deal of effort went into planning and executing this project, including utilizing a wilderness mule trail team. The BLM contributed through an exhaustive environmental analysis prior to permitting this project. Thanks to this effort, the airstrip continues to provide low impact access to this remote and beautiful area.

In addition, aviation organizations have utilized these and other airstrips to provide volunteers to land managers for unrelated projects. For example, technical support and repair was provided on a district's A/V system in its visitor center, and on other districts, fence and gate repair, recreation site cleanup, and historic preservation projects were completed thanks to the access provided to volunteers by area airstrips.

Unfortunately, without sufficient funding, even these successful partnerships can be challenging. The successes are also not as prevalent as they should be, not because of any lack of opportunity or willing participants, but the effects of budget constraints and the cost of firefighting that has crippled our land management agencies, leaving them with insufficient resources to even maintain existing assets.

The RAF believes that collaboration with private interests is the most effective way to meet these challenges. The RAF and broader aviation community will continue to do what we can in the way of caring for these assets, but we must have public partners able to accommodate and support these volunteer efforts. It is for this reason that we respectfully ask that this committee consider some amount of direct funding for aviation assets, which will allow our partners at the BLM and USFS to participate in the ongoing maintenance and upkeep of these important facilities. If the opportunities are not seized before these assets are lost, along with the recreational activities that surround them, interest may wane and the opportunity to meet these challenges through public/private partnerships may be lost.

Citings:

- (1) 2008 IDAHO AIRPORT SYSTEM PLAN - APPENDIX B: ECONOMIC IMPACT ANALYSIS
- (2) 2007 FOIA request and study on behalf of the RAF
- (3) According to USFS National Airstrip Inventory completed 2014