

Testimony of Chuck Wiplinger
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House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Public Witness Hearing
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My name is Chuck Wiplinger, I am President of Wipaire located in St Paul, MN. We are a manufacturing company in the aviation industry – we mostly build floats so airplanes can land on water. We also build floats that fill with water that are used in firefighting.

I'm here today representing the Recreational Aviation Foundation, the RAF, and wish to testify to the value of airfields and airstrips on our public lands – primarily, on the 500 million or so acres managed by the United States Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. There are more than 400 of these airfields scattered across our public lands in areas where roads are either not possible or financially infeasible. Most of these airfields were created after the turn of the 20th century to take advantage of the new technology of the time – airplanes.

The primary mission of the Forest Service in those early days, was to protect our public lands from fire. The airplane played an important role in getting firefighters and equipment into these remote places by flying them into airfields created for the purpose.

As technology advanced, fire crews could be dropped from airplanes or helicoptered into fires.

At that point, these airfields took on a new life, they became access points – or internal trailheads – to remote public lands. This opened up businesses for hunting and fishing outfitters as well as recreators - campers and hikers. The RAF was established 15 years ago in Montana with the goal to preserve these airfields.

The RAF now has almost 10,000 volunteers all across the US to take care of these places, alongside the public land managers who we partner with to keep them maintained.

Our motivation is four-fold:

First, we are passionate about these places because they provide access to amazingly, beautiful areas that would be virtually inaccessible by any other mode of transportation. We go there primarily to camp and hike, just like any other trail user, but our parking lot happens to be a strip of land, typically less than a half mile in length .

Second, if you should ever as a pilot have a problem with your aircraft while flying over some of the great expanse of the US, there is nothing better in life than seeing an airstrip below you as your airplane suddenly becomes a glider. Providing these emergency runways is important to airplane travelers.

Third, these are not only great access points to our public lands, they are historic places as well. The Missouri Breaks in Montana overlooks the path of Lewis and Clark and Moose Creek in Idaho is one of Gifford Pinchot's first Ranger Stations, as well as the site of the first smoke jump.

Finally, we know we're fortunate to have the privilege to fly into these wonderful places and we seek opportunities to pay back that favor by flying missions of mercy – evacuating injured hikers and boaters, searching for missing persons, carrying food and supplies to volunteers.

I want to relate just one brief story that represents our character. One of our volunteers and his son were camping along the Selway River in Idaho, using one of these airfields. They landed late afternoon on a Sunday, and were immediately approached by a group of people for help. The group was on a rafting tour down the Selway River and a woman on the trip was experiencing problems. She was in her first trimester and had begun bleeding. Our volunteer unloaded his airplane, loaded her and her husband into his plane and flew them to Hamilton, MT, the nearest town with medical facilities. Sadly, the woman lost her child, but because she reached medical treatment in time, she was able to have the necessary procedure to ensure her future pregnancies weren't jeopardized. She now has two healthy children and lives in Salem, OR where she said she never forgets the kindness and generosity shown that day in her life. Were it not for that pilot and that airfield that day, the outcome would have been uncertain.

Our pilots also fly people who wouldn't be able to make the trip to these wonderful places in any other way – the physically handicapped, the aged and our Wounded Warriors, to name a few.

All we ask is the Committee continue to fund airfield maintenance in the Forest Service budget so we can volunteer and partner with them to maintain these public assets. They don't require much – in fact, they likely require less than a parking lot in a campground, but they are easily overlooked in the scheme of things.

We also ask that you create an identical budget for the Bureau of Land Management who currently has no budget for airfield maintenance. Our volunteers would welcome the opportunity to partner with the BLM.

Thank you very much Madame Chair, for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today on behalf of the 300,000 pilots in our country. I'm happy to respond to any questions you or the Committee members may have.