5/20/2019

The DEIS provides acreage in the alternatives that are suitable for airfields but does not address the affect airplane landing areas have on the environment. It seems appropriate to discuss this affect if it is a consideration to address airfields on NFS Lands. The below paragraphs discuss the impact of establishing an airfield and the continued impact over time as the airfield is maintained as a forest access point.

Affected Environment (Airfields)

At the present there are no airstrips in the backcountry of the Custer Gallatin NF. The alternatives, set forth in the DEIS, have identified between 907,000 and 1,022,000 acres as suitable for positioning landing strips. An airstrip is between 1200 ft. and 2,000 feet long and 30 to 75 feet wide. Features of the airstrip would include a windsock, runway markers (cones or painted rocks) lining the runway area, and airplane tiedowns. Those visitors who fly into the backcountry often camp next to their airplanes. Additional facilities, normally present at airstrips on NFS Lands, are Fire pans, picnic tables, and toilet facilities. The backcountry pilot community advocates, Fly it in, Fly it out, similar to the NFSs' pack it in, pack it out philosophy. The landing strip is positioned in a relatively flat meadow capable of accommodating the above airstrip dimensions, and the runway surface is composed of the native grasses of the area.

Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF) is a 501(c)(3) public charity dedicated to "keeping the legacy of recreational aviation strong by preserving, maintaining and creating public use recreational and backcountry airstrips nationwide" (RAF 2011). RAF has a current MOU with U.S.D.A. Forest Service that allows members of RAF to volunteer their time to make necessary repairs to airstrips on NFS Lands. RAF arranges workdays, often with the help of forest personnel, to make repairs to airstrips to keep them in safe working order. Repairs include mowing the strip once a year, replacing the windsock, painting the cones or rocks that line the strip and maintaining the other facilities present. Based on visitor registration logs at airstrips on public land, the average number of planes is 15 to 20 per year per airstrip, averaging 30 to 40 visitors per year. The aircraft types; approximately two thirds will be various models of Cessna airplanes. Other types of planes included various models of Pipers, Maules, and Beechcraft.

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Pilot members of the RAF, Airplane Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), Experimental Aviation Association (EAA), state pilots' associations, and local flying interest groups are prepared to provide collaborative assistance in drafting forest plans, travel plans, and recreation plans. Individual members of these groups provide volunteer labor and materials every year to help maintain airstrips located on NFS land. We have successfully collaborated with, and will continue to work with, Forest Managers to re-open closed airstrips in many states.

In one collaborative example, working with officials of the Lewis and Clark Forest in central Montana, the RAF, the Montana Pilot's Association and other volunteers opened the first new airstrip in 46 years on USFS land. The Russian Flat airstrip was authorized during the forest plan development and subsequently was granted in the forest travel plan. The airstrip was constructed using all volunteer labor, equipment, and at a cost to the pilot community of over $200,000. Not a single dollar, other than salaried time for the USFS personnel monitoring the construction, was expended from USFS appropriations. Recognizing the importance of aviation in revising the Custer Gallatin Plan will lead to expansion of our collaborative efforts within the region.

The RAF also maintains a Challenge Cost Share Agreement between the Recreational Aviation Foundation and the USDA Forest Service, National Headquarters.

It is filed as: FS Agreement No. 18-CS-11132400-043