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Subject: Recreation Access Through Backcountry Airstrips

To: Regional Foresters, Station Directors, Area Director, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs
and WO Directors

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.

As Chief, I want line officers and resource planning staff to support use of recreational aircraft and backcountry airstrips on NFS lands where appropriate considering local resource conditions and as part of a balanced, safe, and efficient forest transportation system. It is our policy to develop aircraft landing facilities, including backcountry airstrips, on NFS lands consistent with the applicable land management plan and applicable Federal Aviation Administration regulations (49 U.S.C.1349).

Accordingly, pursuant to my authority at 36 CFR 212.2(c), I am prescribing that the annual program of work for the Forest Transportation System for each administrative unit (1) include an inventory of backcountry airstrips under Forest Service jurisdiction, regardless of prior ownership and (2) listing of these facilities on the Forest Transportation Atlas, where appropriate under the applicable land management plan and existing management direction and after assessment of potential risks to public safety and the requisite environmental analyses have been conducted.

Regulations at 36 CFR 212.1, Subpart A identify *airfields* as part of the Forest Transportation System. Aircraft are motor vehicles (36 CFR 212.1, Subpart A]. However aircraft are exempt in regulations describing the designation of roads, trails, and areas at 36 CFR 212.5 (a) (1), Subpart B. The public use of the airfields listed in the Forest Transportation Atlas are to be managed similar to that of NFS roads and trails. Backcountry airstrips listed within the Forest Transportation System are open for general public, unless marked as closed.

Decisions to open backcountry airstrips to public use should be made after consultation with the local engineering, fire and aviation, recreation, ecosystem management, and other affected staffs. Ultimately local line officers are responsible for successful management of airstrips on NFS lands. Constrained availability of appropriated funds for operation and maintenance and potential risks to public safety and natural resources, including limited availability of assistance

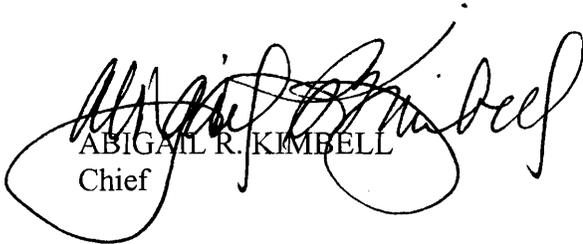


in emergencies, may affect the appropriateness of making a backcountry airstrip available for public recreational use. Land use authorizations may also be an appropriate tool in authorizing backcountry airstrips.

Airstrips that are already listed on the Forest Transportation Atlas and that are available to the public should remain open to the public, unless a change in resource conditions, public use, or risk factors warrants closure. Airstrips that are currently closed to public use should remain closed until new information or conditions warrant opening them to public use.

Operation and maintenance of airstrips may provide opportunities for cooperative relationships under Challenge-Cost Share and other authorities. The recreation pilot communities are significantly engaged in providing funding, human resources, expertise, and equipment for backcountry airstrips on NFS lands. Cooperative development and maintenance of public airstrips in the Forest Transportation System does not necessarily require issuance of land use authorization. The use of volunteers in joint development of Russian Flat public airstrip on the Judith Ranger District, Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana is an excellent example of cooperative development.

I am confident that our line officers and resource managers will strive to provide a full spectrum of recreational uses, including safe and sufficient operation and maintenance of airstrips, as a vital component of the Forest Transportation System.



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Chief