

Amendment No. 878

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, I have an amendment at the desk.
The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report.
The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Idaho [Mr. Crapo], for himself, Mr.
Murkowski, and Mr. Craig, proposes an amendment numbered 878.

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that further
reading of the amendment be dispensed with.
The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.
The amendment is as follows:

(Purpose: To help ensure general aviation aircraft access to Federal
land, and the airspace over that land)

At the appropriate place, insert the following:

SEC. 3 _____. BACKCOUNTRY LANDING STRIP ACCESS.

(a) In General.--Funds made available by this Act shall not
be used to permanently close any aircraft landing strip
described in subsection (b) without public notice,
consultation with appropriate Federal and State aviation
officials, and the consent of the Federal Aviation
Administration.

(b) Aircraft landing strips.--An aircraft landing strip
referred to in subsection (a) is a landing strip on Federal
land that--

(1) is officially recognized by an appropriate Federal or
State aviation official;

(2) is administered by the Secretary of the Interior or the
Secretary of Agriculture; and

(3) is commonly known for use for, and is consistently used
for, aircraft landing and departure activities.

(c) Permanent Closure.--For the purposes of subsection (a),
an aircraft landing strip shall be considered to be closed
permanently if the intended duration of the closure is more
than 180 days in any calendar year.

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, first, I thank the chairman of the
Appropriations Committee, Senator Byrd, and the ranking member, Senator
Burns, for the hard work they have put into this year's Interior and
related agencies appropriations bill. It is a changing process and they
have done an excellent job in balancing the competing interests within
the confines of our effort to make sure we maintain a balanced budget.

At this point, I want to explain the amendment I present. I intend to
withdraw the amendment when I am finished discussing it for reasons
that will become apparent as I discuss it. In the past couple of years,
we have seen a disturbing trend in the Department of the Interior and
in the Depart of Agriculture regarding our Forest Service relating to
back-country airstrips. The administration has begun to follow a
pattern of allowing back-country airstrips to either go into a state of
disrepair--here they become unusable--or to actually close, permanently
close some of them, which is a serious problem to those parts of our

public lands that need the services that these back-country airstrips can supply.

Idaho, right now, is home to more than 50 of these landing strips, and our State is known nationwide for its air access to public lands and wilderness and primitive areas. Unfortunately, in the past, many of these airstrips in Idaho, and in other parts of the country, have been rendered unserviceable through the neglect I talked about earlier, or the decisions to close the airstrips without adequate public notice or any justification being provided.

There is a concern about this because these airstrips provide not only access to the back country for recreational use, but they are critical for maintenance and some of the management purposes of the agencies in managing our public lands and fighting forest fires, for example, or in providing the necessary access by agency personnel to perform their work on public lands, and also as part of rescue missions when they find the need to provide for rescue. It is those who use the back-country airstrips who are often the ones who provide the valiant efforts to make rescues of people who are in distress in our national public lands.

Senators Craig and Murkowski are cosponsors with me on the legislation to address this issue and to require the agencies to work with State and local communities and to engage in a process of public notice and justification. In fact, it is our hope that, ultimately, we will be able to pass this legislation on a permanent basis. That would require the agencies to obtain the consent of the State personnel who are involved with the management of our airways and aviation concerns.

At this point, we were prepared to offer this amendment to the bill this year to the Interior appropriations bill, which would have, simply for the period of this appropriations bill, required the agencies to consult with the State agency officials involved in aviation management in the States, and to assure that the right kind of consultation would occur between the various State and Federal officials before closure of any of these landing strips in our back-country areas.

However, we have been working with the administration to try to obviate the need to propose this amendment. I am pleased to say, that I am now able

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to report to the people in the country that both the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture have agreed--and I will be submitting letters for the Record in writing to indicate this agreement--that they will honor the purposes of this amendment and make it the policy of those two agencies to comply with the requirements of this amendment and to continue to work with us on our permanent legislation so we can address this issue on a permanent basis.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. I wonder if I can interrupt the Senator from Idaho in an effort to develop a colloquy with the Senator with regard to encouraging various agencies to work with the States on the issue of backcountry airport access.

Mr. CRAPO. I will be glad to yield to the Senator from Alaska.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. It is probably not applicable in areas of high concentration of private land, but out West, we have vast areas of virtually nothing. You can only appreciate that if you get in a small airplane and fly over the western part of the United States or my State

of Alaska.

I had a group of Senators in a single-engine airplane a few years ago. We had been in the air 2\1/2\ hours cruising along at about 80 knots. Finally, one of them said: How much more wilderness do I have to see to, indeed, believe there is a lot of wilderness to be seen and beauty to be seen?

Nevertheless, when that engine quits, you have a problem. If you do not have some of these areas available--I know many of our friends from the east coast and populated areas cannot quite appreciate why we need them, but we vitally need them.

I join with my colleague in what I understand is a general commitment from the agencies, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior, to work with the States to identify what is in the interest of the States from the standpoint of safety access.

I commend him in that effort and hope when legislation is necessary that our colleagues will understand we need this in the wide open spaces out West. I see my friend from Montana who also agrees with this. I yield the floor.

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, I thank my friend and colleague from Alaska for his strong support on this issue. He is, as I indicated, a cosponsor of the legislation we will be pursuing and was supporting us in the effort to put this amendment on this bill again as it was last year.

Just so we can understand correctly, I want to read into the Record what the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture committed to so we can begin the process, which I think is a very important first step in moving toward resolution of this issue.

The first letter is from Secretary Gale Norton, the Secretary of the Interior:

Dear Senator Crapo: The U.S. Department of the Interior is committed to working with you and other Members of Congress to develop a comprehensive process to ensure that state and local governments and citizens have an opportunity to participate in issues relating to backcountry airstrips located on lands managed by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

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 an essential safety tool 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. It is also a priority for this Department that any proposals to alter use of federal lands must go through open and public process that includes close consultation with local communities. I commit to work with you, and other members of the congressional delegation, the State of Idaho, and local communities on any proposals to change the use of backcountry airstrips on lands managed by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The second letter is from the Department of Agriculture:

Dear Senator Crapo: The U.S. Department of Agriculture is

committed to working with you and other Members of Congress to develop a comprehensive, long-term approach for managing backcountry airstrips on lands managed by the USDA Forest Service.

We agree that it is appropriate to maintain airstrips that provide critical air access to rural, backcountry, or wilderness areas; that contribute to pilot safety; or that support aerial firefighting efforts. The Department also agrees that these airstrips should not be permanently closed without prior consultation with State aviation and other appropriate officials.

We appreciate your leadership on this issue and look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,

Ann Veneman,
Secretary.

Mr. President, because we have now obtained the commitment of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior that they will work with us in a public process and in a consultative process with the State officials involved in managing aviation issues, and because they have acknowledged the important critical needs of maintaining these backcountry airstrips in good condition, and instead of closing them, keeping them open and available for use, we do not believe it is necessary to pursue this amendment on this legislation.

I appreciate the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture agreeing and working with us to avoid the need for this amendment, and we appreciate their commitment to work with us in the future on permanent legislation that will fully resolve this issue statutorily.

Therefore, Mr. President, I withdraw the amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, the amendment is withdrawn.

The amendment (No. 878) was withdrawn.

Mr. CRAPO. I thank the Chair.