

The Big Creek Four Aviation Scores a Major Victory

Some of the tiniest and toughest airstrips in the nation are scattered throughout the Big Creek drainage of central Idaho. Near the western edge of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness (FC-RONRW), seven public airstrips dot the landscape in the 26-mile-long canyon before it enters a narrow gap and spills into the Salmon River.

The most difficult strips, Mile-Hi, Vines, Dewey Moore, and Simonds, known as the “Big Creek Four,” offer unmatched seclusion and tremendous hiking and fishing in a spectacular setting. With unconventional approaches and departures, runways as short as 520 ft., and slopes approaching 25 percent, it goes without saying that pilots need experience and suitable aircraft to visit these gems of the backcountry.

The area has a rich history with stories of Indian battles and early 1900s homesteaders. Built in the 1940s and 50s, the airstrips are testament to the skills of the early pioneers in Idaho aviation.

Keeping Strips Open

Congress adopted the Central Idaho Wilderness Act early in the 1980s. One of the areas created by the act was named the River of No Return Wilderness. Recently, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) interpreted the law differently than its intended purpose and set out on a mission to close some of the lesser-used airstrips. They had their own idea of what a backcountry airstrip should look like, and certainly none of the Big Creek Four met that interpretation.

The USFS proposed that the airstrips be classified as “emergency use only,” which, under the wilderness management plan, would halt maintenance and effectively close the strips.

This was contrary to wording in the Central Idaho Wilderness Act, which states, “the landing of aircraft is permitted to continue where the use was established prior to the date of enactment.” According to the act, “airstrips may not be closed or rendered unserviceable for reasons other than extreme danger to aircraft, *but* in no case without the permission of the state transportation department charged with evaluating the safety of the airstrips.” Authorization to close the strips has never been given.

When the USFS proposed this wording, members of the Idaho Aviation Association (IAA), Montana Pilots Association, and Recreational Aviation Foundation generated a letter-writing campaign to both the USFS and Idaho’s legislative delegation.

Idaho senators Craig and Crapo agreed to intervene on behalf of pilots everywhere.

The senators organized a conference call with the USFS regional leaders, the IAA, and the Idaho Transportation Department in August 2004. During the call, maintenance plans were discussed and agreed upon, but most importantly, the USFS agreed to reclassify the airstrips replacing “emergency-use only” with the more appropriate “hazardous” classification.

Idaho State Aeronautics, under the leadership of division administrator Bob Martin, and the IAA have worked closely to save these and other airstrips from closure. When contacted to confirm the status of the strips, Martin enthusiastically reported, “They are open for public use.” IAA president Bob Patrick added that the biggest success in these meetings is not only saving the Big Creek Four, but establishing for the future that “aviation in Idaho is a valid and lawful user of the FC-RONRW.”

The airstrips provide access to the backcountry not only for recreational use, but they are also critical for maintenance and management purposes of federal and state lands, fighting forest fires, and availability for rescue missions for other user groups. Nor are they merely there as emergency landing sites; although in several cases they have been used in emergencies.

Prudent Use Advised

It is definitely wise to seek appropriate training prior to visiting these or other backcountry strips. The skilled pilot in a suitable aircraft will be treated to an experience like no other, with opportunities to explore where few have been. Lori MacNichol of McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying Seminars, LLC, is intimately familiar with this area and is usually available for instruction with some notice. It’s cheap insurance to go with a pro like Lori before tackling the backcountry on your own, (208) 634-1344, www.mountaincanyonflying.com.

Every time you fly—short airstrip or not—practice short field takeoffs and landings. Pick a spot and hit it. Settle for nothing less than perfection. The window for a safe touchdown on these strips is a dozen feet. The penalty for less-than-perfection at your home field is just more time required to practice. The penalty in the backcountry can be substantial.

A word of caution: the airstrips are available as an access point and you



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should have a specific reason for visiting them. This isn’t the place to go if you’re looking to chalk up as many airstrips as you can. Compared to other user groups in the FC-RONRW, aviation plays a small part. We should seek to keep our profile low and prudent, to use the airstrips as they were intended, and keep our image untarnished so that the progress we have made will not have been in vain.

Backcountry aviation in Idaho has always been the model by which others are measured. According to the late U.S. Senator Frank Church, the original Wilderness Act of 1964 was never intended to eliminate valid uses within the wilderness boundaries. In one of his speeches on the floor of the senate, he stated, “It was never the intent of Congress that wilderness be managed in so ‘pure’ a fashion as to needlessly restrict customary public use and enjoyment... I make no apologies for my commitment to assuring that this spectacular area can be seen and enjoyed whether this access is by horseback, on foot, via jet-boat, or small plane.”

Senator Frank Church died of cancer shortly thereafter. His name was added as a prefix to the descriptive title “River of No Return Wilderness” to honor the man with such a vision. A vision that we continue to honor in the backcountry airstrips of Idaho. ■

The Idaho Aviation Association is actively pursuing re-opening of other airstrips in Idaho. Join them at www.flyidaho.org.

The Recreational Aviation Foundation is using tax-deductible donations to acquire new public-use airstrips as well as preserve and maintain existing strips, www.recreation-aviationfoundation.org.

An excellent resource for the Idaho backcountry is Galen Hanselman’s *Fly Idaho!*, www.flyidaho.com.

Lori MacNichol can be reached at (208) 634-1344, www.mountain-canyonflying.com.