

Wurtz Airstrip

The North Fork Holdout

by Mike Sidders

The 2003 fire season in north-west Montana was in full fury, filling the skies with smoke. A U.S. Forest Service (USFS) contract Piper Seneca with the pilot and two USFS employees aboard was two hours into a morning fire surveillance flight. The left engine suddenly sputtered and died over rugged terrain and limited visibility. Incredibly, the plane was nearly out of fuel.

The USFS fire attack officer aboard remembered an airstrip not far away along the North Fork of the Flathead River. He directed the pilot to the area as there was no chance they could make it back to Glacier Park International Airport with fuel gauges on empty. With a controlled one-engine descent, they landed on the rough gravel strip, relieved to be safe.

Failure to check the fuel prior to departure cost the pilot his job. The existence of a backcountry airstrip saved three lives. Phil Frey, a ground worker on the Wedge Canyon fire, was told by the pilot, "It's kinda' rough, but I'm sure glad it was here. I don't think we would have made it to another strip."

No Maintenance Allowed

The airstrip that saved the day is called Wurtz, a narrow track of river rock and gravel stretching across a broad bend in the river. It is a little rough and neglected; in fact, it fits so well into the landscape that one has to know what he is looking at to recognize it as an airstrip. But this airstrip, on USFS land, has seen occasional use for years by recreational pilots, fishermen, and the government.

Two airstrips along the North Fork, Sondreson and Wurtz, have seen historic public use on a limited basis. The USFS first acquired Sondreson in 1978 and later prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to determine the future of the airstrip. The EA documented that existing use had no adverse effect on wildlife, no adverse effect on the recreational experience, no adverse effect on the Wild and Scenic River Act, and no administrative costs. But there were those who were opposed to the existence of the airstrip, and, in the end, the USFS closed Sondreson.

One stipulation of the closure was that in the event other public air facilities in the North Fork Valley became unavailable, then the Sondreson closure must be re-evaluated. It appears that in their effort to keep Sondreson closed, no official ruling has been made on Wurtz.

The District Ranger for the Hungry Horse and Glacier View Ranger Districts is the local governing authority on the North Fork. He has stated that the USFS must follow the environmental review process to consider any maintenance at Wurtz.



In a November 1999 letter to Chuck Jarecki, board member of the non-profit Recreational Aviation Foundation, the USFS wrote, "We will not allow any improvements or maintenance of the Wurtz airstrip until this [an environmental assessment] has been accomplished. On the other hand, we have not taken any action to block the runway or to legally close the airstrip, nor will we do so until the environmental review is completed at some point in the future." The USFS has still made no effort to complete the process.

Other Airstrips

Two examples of successful strips within a Wild and Scenic River corridor are Meadow Creek in Montana and Wilson Bar in Idaho. And, to reiterate, the EA on Sondreson specifically states that there is no adverse impact on the Wild and Scenic River Act.

The Montana Aeronautics Division has performed a cost analysis and made repeated offers to repair and maintain the strip to USFS standards at no cost to the federal government. This, combined with years of attempted cooperative efforts between concerned pilots and the USFS, has been brushed aside and largely ignored by the district rangers.

Employees of the USFS continue to refute the validity of Wurtz airstrip, despite the fact that the passengers aboard the



Above: The Wurtz Airstrip along the North Fork of the Flathead River in Montana. Left: A USFS Seneca made an emergency landing on the airstrip in 2003.

Seneca on July 24, 2003, were two of their own employees. In all likelihood, they are alive today because the Wurtz airstrip was available.

With your help, it will be there for generations to come.

Getting Involved

Board members of the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF) have developed a good working relationship with many USFS employees by presenting factual data and making reasonable requests. While the requests for clarification on the status of Wurtz are ongoing, significant progress is being made on other fronts by engaging in the Resource Management Planning Processes of the National Forests in Montana as well as the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument.

The RAF is depending on other pilots to help them in identifying potential real estate for the development of new airstrips. Oftentimes we have friends or acquaintances who built their own airstrip and want to see their dream continue long after they are gone. These situations lend themselves perfectly to the tax-deductions that are available to the donor.

As a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, the RAF is using tax-deductible donations to protect existing airstrips and acquire new facilities for public use. The board members receive no compensation. Donations of any kind, including land for airstrip development are fully tax-deductible and the RAF has tax and legal assistance available for donors, (406) 587-5166, www.recreationalaviationfoundation.org. ■