

Backcountry Landing Strip Access Act

April 2001

In recent years, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association has noticed an increase in the number of permanent closures of backcountry airstrips. Many airstrips have been closed without consulting state aviation departments, local and national aviation groups, or the public. AOPA's goal is to implement a national policy governing general aviation issues related to Federal land. After the spate of forest fires in the past two years, the importance of maintaining these backcountry airstrips is more critical than ever.

On Tuesday, April 3, 2001, Senator Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) and Representatives Butch Otter (R-Idaho) and AOPA member James Hansen (R-Utah) reintroduced the Backcountry Landing Strip Access Act (S. 681/H.R. 1363). Both AOPA-backed bills block efforts by federal agencies to restrict or arbitrarily prohibit general aviation's use of backcountry airstrips by requiring approval from state aviation officials before closing landing sites on federal land. Last year Senator Crapo, with the help of Senators Conrad Burns (R-Mont.) and Slade Gorton (R-Wash.), successfully attached a provision to the Interior Appropriations Conference Report for FY 2001, prohibiting federal funds from being used to close any airstrips on lands administered by the Department of the Interior.

The AOPA-Supported Legislation:

- Requires a 90-day public comment period on proposed airstrip closures.
- Requires state aviation departments approve all airstrip closures in their states.
- Creates a national policy governing general aviation issues related to Federal land, and requires the proposal recognize that the Federal Aviation Administration has sole authority over airspace and aviation.
- Will not, despite what environmental groups intimate, reopen airstrips that have been closed, nor will it require that existing airstrips be paved.

Original Co-Sponsors of the Legislation:

S. 681 (introduced by Senator Mike Crapo):

- Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
- Conrad Burns (R-Mont.)
- Robert F. Bennett (R-Utah)
- Larry E. Craig (R-Idaho)
- Michael B. Enzi (R-Wyo.)
- James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.)
- Frank Murkowski (R-Alaska)
- Ted Stevens (R- Alaska)

H.R. 1363 (introduced by Representatives Butch Otter and James Hansen):

- Charlie Bass (R-N.H.)
- Leonard Boswell (D-Iowa)
- Chris Cannon (R-Utah)
- John Cooksey (R-La.)
- Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.)
- Jim Gibbons (R-Nev.)
- Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.)
- Doc Hastings (R-Wash.)
- Robin Hayes (R-N.C.)
- Joel Hefley (R-Colo.)
- Wally Herger (R-Calif.)
- Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.)
- Walter Jones (R-N.C.)
- Scott McInnis (R-Colo.)
- John Mica (R-Fla.)
- George Nethercutt (R-Wash.)
- George Radanovich (R-Calif.)
- Dennis Rehberg (R-Mont.)
- Bob Schaffer (R-Colo.)
- Mike Simpson (R-Idaho)
- Bob Stump (R-Ariz.)
- Greg Walden (R-Ore.)
- Don Young (R-Alaska)

Background

Many airstrips are closed by federal land management agencies without a public process. We have heard from our members and state aviation officials that they often discover an airstrip has been closed only when they attempt to use it. This action represents a grave danger to pilots who have not been made aware of an airstrip's closure prior to an attempt to land there.

Backcountry airstrips serve an essential purpose in firefighting, disaster relief, search and rescue, forest and ecological management, research, and aerial mapping.

Remote dirt and grass airstrips play an important safety role as emergency landing areas. If a single engine piston aircraft loses its engine, an immediate landing is required. In mountainous terrain, an airstrip could be the difference between life and death for a pilot and passengers.

Backcountry airstrips will never be popular destination spots because the average recreational pilot does not have the training or skills needed to fly into wilderness strips. Those who use remote airstrips are highly experienced backcountry pilots who own aircraft that are properly designed to fly into and out of rough terrain. For this reason, many airstrips likely see, on average, no more than 3-6 landings and takeoffs in one year.

The cost of maintaining backcountry airstrips is minimal. In many states, pilots themselves regularly trim vegetation, remove rocks from the landing site, and fill in potholes. If repairs are needed, local pilots and state aviation officials are more than willing to work with land managers to make the repairs.