

OPPORTUNITIES FOR AIRFIELDS.

Some pilots believe that flying is a valid form of recreation and transportation and that they deserve access onto the National Forest System lands just like anyone else. Some believe airfields in the analysis area would increase safety during flight emergencies, and could also help with search and rescue operations, wildland firefighting, and access for the disabled. Others feel that there is no need for airfields, which would create noise conflicts, encourage illegal outfitting, cause illegal flights over big game populations to locate game and hunt them the same day, and threaten their opportunities for quiet recreation settings.

Measure: number, location, and description of airfields by alternative, including Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) settings they would be located in and next to; and possible ROS conflicts; effects on adjacent recreation; and opportunities for illegal outfitting. Compliance with other Forest Plan requirements, including Visual Quality Objective (VQO), management area direction, and effects on Wilderness Study Areas.

1. EXISTING CONDITION

a. Existing airfields and maintenance requirements

Benchmark airstrip is presently the only the airplane landing facility on the Lewis and Clark National Forest, and is located adjacent to Benchmark campground on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District. The Forest has been able to provide only minimal maintenance to this paved runway because of the lack of road maintenance funding and higher capital investment priorities on existing forest roads elsewhere in the Northern Region of the Forest Service. The Montana Aeronautics Division has been assisting with maintenance. The forest has attempted unsuccessfully to get Forest Service capital investment funding to maintain and prolong the life of the existing asphalt of this runway. This airstrip, being federally owned, is not eligible for Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) grants. Currently, pilots have developed and maintain their own small campground at Benchmark airstrip.

There are no operational airstrips on the Lewis and Clark National Forest in the Little Belt, Crazy, and Castle Mountains. Pilots, both Forest Service and private, flying in these mountain ranges use adjacent public airport facilities at Bozeman, Great Falls, Harlowton, Helena, Lewistown, Livingston, Ryegate, Stanford, Townsend, and White Sulphur Springs. Pilots wishing to recreate on the National Forest presently can land at these airports and travel by vehicle to the Forest.

On the Flathead National Forest, there are three airfields, including; Schaeffer Meadows (inside the Wilderness) Spotted Bear, and at Meadow Creek (both inside wilderness study areas) that are available to the public use for recreation. According to Deb Mucklow, District Ranger at Spotted Bear Ranger District, these airfields require maintenance, but the state's pilot community and the Montana Aeronautics Division have always pitched in to help defray costs and help provide annual maintenance. There have been minimal costs incurred by the Forest Service in order to meet Forest Service Manual annual safety inspection requirements. Mucklow was not aware of any reported conflicts between aircraft use and other recreationists.

In the Missouri River Breaks Monument area on BLM lands north of the Forest, there are presently ten primitive airstrips in existence. Access on the ground to these is limited because of private property and minimal roads. The Bureau of Land Management is proposing that six of the airstrips be kept, but that access roads to them closed. They are also proposing planning language to address airstrips if use becomes higher than expected. Much of the area is already in a military aircraft training area, so noise from military aircraft is currently present at the monument.

The FAA sets standards for maintenance of aviation facilities on National Forest lands. An annual maintenance plan is to be developed and updated yearly to include the following (FSH 7709.58, Chapter 30):

- Clearing of approach-ways
- Mowing and leveling of surfaces
- Wind indicators--installation and maintenance
- Marking landing areas
- Provision for proper tie down areas
- Provisions for proper drainage of the runway

According to Terry Knupp, Recreation Staff Officer for the Northern Region of the Forest Service; it is possible to issue a special use permit to an interested party (e.g., a group of pilots) that would require that any construction and maintenance costs for a permitted airstrip be covered by that group, including liability insurance(personal communication). The airstrip would remain open for use by any member of the public flying community.

b. Past Events and Existing Social and Management Conditions

Historically, two airstrips existed, but have since been infrequently used at the Middle Fork Ranch area (mostly on private land in the Middle Fork Judith River drainage), and not used at the Lost Fork of Judith River area of the same Middle Fork Judith wilderness study area. Notes from a 1982 Final Environmental Statement for the Middle Fork Judith and Big Snowies Wilderness Study Act indicated that at that time, “Occasionally, aircraft land in the lower Lost Fork area as well as at the primitive airstrip in Cleveland Creek.” Neither airfield is currently operational. The Lost Fork airstrip has been impacted by runoff from past wildfire impacts and is barely recognizable. Historically, both facilities were grass runways. Neither airstrip is shown on aeronautical charts maintained by the Montana Aeronautics Division, according to Jim Greil, Bureau Chief for the Airports/Airways Bureau of that division. Local landowners have not seen the Middle Fork Ranch (Cleveland Creek) airstrip used by fixed wing aircraft in many years. There is a proposal by the aviation community that the Middle Fork Ranch airstrip be lengthened to avoid landing on private land. There is enough room on NFS lands to lengthen the airstrip, but would entail removal of a cattle enclosure fence under permit to MFWP.

Today, several pilots have indicated in public comments on the Jefferson Division Travel Plan Proposed Action that new airstrips on the Forest would increase their safety in the event of mechanical problems requiring an emergency landing site. According to Ron Teig, Lewis and Clark National Forest Aviation Officer, “additional airstrips would improve opportunities for emergency landings, and could also provide areas to land for search and rescue operations.” Teig felt that emergency medivac operations would be accomplished by helicopters rather than fixed wing aircraft (personal communication).

Pilots also indicate various other reasons why these airstrips would be beneficial to the public, including recreational opportunities for the pilots and passengers; more money to the local economy through fuel purchases by airstrip users; opportunities to help the disabled access primitive country; and to help with fire control work and search and rescue operations. Lee Clark, former Forest Fire Staff Officer, felt that additional airstrips could provide helibase opportunities, but saw no other significant use for them in fire control efforts (personal communication). Helibases are those facilities used by helicopters during wildfire control efforts for staging, loading, and cargo transport. According to Ron Teig, Forest Aviation Officer, new airstrips would probably be used by agency aircraft, but overall use would be low. We agree that airplanes can provide the disabled access into the national forest, but such can also be provided by a wide variety of other forms of transportation, including road and off-road vehicles and stock. The number of disabled individuals benefiting from aircraft transportation into remote airfields on the forest, unless the activity was commercialized, would probably be very low. Accessibility, once outside the aircraft, would be problematic for those individuals requiring wheelchairs and accessible toilets. Only Deep Creek Park and Lost Fork airstrips can be considered remote, or away from existing high clearance vehicle access.

There are members of the public opposed to the inclusion of airstrips in primitive country because of effects on the solitude of non-motorized recreationists. Airplanes using airstrips fly over large expanses of country and can impact those areas with their noise when flying at lower altitudes to land. Airplanes are expensive and only a limited number of the public can afford to own or operate them, making the benefiting user group quite small. There is also concern that illegal outfitting will result if some pilots are paid to provide a “livery” service, helping hunters spot game, dropping hunters off into wild country and then picking them up later after they’ve hunted. Regulating this kind of activity would be very difficult if it occurs from remote airstrips with no road access. We recognize that illegal use of an aircraft could jeopardize a pilot’s license, but the remoteness of some airstrips could make that risk fairly low.

Legislatively, there are national ongoing efforts being made to ensure that existing backcountry airstrips on other forests remain in operation, are maintained, and are accessible (online: <http://www.montanapilots.org/backcountry/index.html>). The Lewis and Clark National Forest runs the risk, that by allowing new airstrips in the Little Belts Mountains, the agency may not be able to close them in the future because of such potential legislation. New airstrips could potentially represent an irretrievable commitment to the flying community.

It is very likely that the Forest Service would have to incur some management costs in the construction and maintenance of airstrip facilities in the future. Such is presently occurring with the maintenance of Benchmark airstrip. Significant help for primitive airstrips could be expected from the Montana Aeronautics Division, according to Jim Griel (personal communication). He indicated that aviation gas tax funds are available for competitive grants to agencies seeking to construct or maintain airstrips. He indicated that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) does not have grants available to federal agencies, but that state aviation gas tax funds are available. The Montana Pilots Association can also be counted on to provide help in maintaining airstrips used by them, as they have historically done and recommend on their organizational website. Such volunteer work would be essential to the agency in helping maintain primitive airstrips. Griel indicated that maintenance costs of primitive grass airstrips are low.

There is very little likelihood that new airstrip construction would receive priority in the Forest Service Northern Region’s road capital investment program. Maintenance of these new features would occur at a time when road maintenance budgets are very low. The Forest is presently struggling to handle maintenance for the existing Benchmark airstrip. Future road maintenance budgets are not expected to increase significantly. It is the road maintenance budget that would be used to help maintain any new airstrips.

Table III-10. Airfield Consistency with ROS Setting and Airfield Presence by Summer Alternative

AIRFIELDS	ROS*	ROS Conflict?			
		Summer ALT. 1	Summer ALT. 3	Summer ALT. 4	Summer ALT. 5
Deep Creek Park	SPM	--	No	--	--
M. Fork Judith W.S.A. (M.Fk.Ranch)	RN	--	No	--	No
M. Fork Judith W.S.A. (Lost Fk.)	SPNM	--	Yes	--	--
Holiday Camp TH	RN	--	No	--	--
Russian Flat	RN/SPNM	--	--	--	Yes

*RN is roaded natural; SPM is semi-primitive motorized; and SPNM is semi-primitive non-motorized.

Table III-11. Airfield Consistency with Forest Plan Direction

AIRFIELDS	Meets VQO	Mgmt. Area Conflict?
Deep Creek Park	Yes	Yes
M. Fork Judith W.S.A. (M.Fk.Ranch)	Yes	Yes
M. Fork Judith W.S.A. (Lost Fk.)*	??	Yes
Holiday Camp TH	Yes	No
Russian Flat	Yes	No

*Meeting the VQO depends on the amount of ground disturbance needed to reestablish airstrip, and its visibility from visually sensitive Lost Fork Trail 409. This is presently unknown.

Table III- 12. Airfield Consistency with Wilderness Study Area and Rating Factors

AIRFIELDS	In WSA?	WSA Rating Factor Conflict?
Deep Creek Park	No	N/A*
M. Fork Judith W.S.A. (M.Fk.Ranch)	Yes	Yes
M. Fork Judith W.S.A. (Lost Fk.)	Yes	Yes
Holiday Camp TH	No	N/A
Russian Flat	No	N/A

*N/A means “Not Applicable”

2. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

a. Alternative 1 - No Action Alternative

1. Direct and Indirect Effects

Proposal. Table III-10 shows there are no airstrips in the no action alternative.

Recreation Opportunity Setting (ROS) and Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs). There are no conflicts with ROS in this alternative.

Recreation and potential for illegal outfitting. There are no conflicts in this alternative.

a. Pilot recreation opportunities—There are none for pilots wanting to fly into the Jefferson Division and land. They have opportunities, like the rest of the public, to access the National Forest by non-flying means, but their aircraft can not land on the National Forest.

b. Effects of noise and sights to other recreationists by ROS setting—These are minimal, because there are no airstrips attracting aircraft to the area. There is some flying by aircraft simply flying over the study area.

c. Potential for illegal outfitting—There are none from pilots unless they land on existing parks or other grassy areas. The likelihood of this occurring is very small.

d. Smith River—Aircraft flights associated with airstrips on National Forest do not exist in this alternative.

Consistency with Forest Plan Management Areas. The lack of airstrips in this alternative creates no conflict with the Forest Plan management areas.

Consistency with Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Area. There is no conflict because the Lost Fork airstrip is non-operational and the Middle Fork Ranch airstrip has been in existence many years, and receives very infrequent use.

2. Cumulative Effects

Airstrips are another means of providing motorized access to the Forest. Noise associated with motorized recreation come from non-flying recreation activities, including road vehicles and OHVs. In this alternative, increased motorized use in the future will not be increased by the associated noise and appearance of aircraft landings. Effects of closure of some airstrips in the Missouri River Breaks National Monument can theoretically reduce opportunities for use of primitive landing strips there and associated recreation for pilots, but that would not affect the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

b. Action Alternatives 3-5

1. Direct and Indirect Effects

Proposal. Table III-10 shows the ROS setting and name of proposed airstrips by alternative. Alternative 3 has the most airstrips proposed, while Alternative 4 has none.

Recreation Opportunity Settings (ROS) and Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs). The basic assumption underlying ROS is that quality in outdoor recreation is best assured when a

wide range of diverse recreation settings are provided, helping to ensure that most of the public will find settings to their liking. These settings help provide quality recreation experiences both now and in the future. This range of settings will vary in level of development, access, and other factors (USDA Forest Service 1986 ROS Handbook). An ROS setting inconsistency occurs when the ROS setting and an element of that setting don't each separately contribute to the same type of ROS opportunity. For example, an airstrip requiring a lot of clearing would not be consistent in a semi-primitive motorized setting because it requires modification of the desired natural setting. On the other hand, an airstrip in the same setting that lies lightly on the land and requires minimal clearing could be consistent with a motorized ROS setting.

Roaded Natural (RN) settings are motorized, with road vehicles present or within about one-half mile distance. These RN settings may have associated structures on them that are easily accessed by road vehicles, and typically have little feeling of remoteness and solitude. The sights and sounds of road vehicles are very evident. Facility development, including structures accessed by road vehicles, may be present. Airstrips typically are consistent with these settings.

Alternative 3 has two proposed airstrips in this ROS setting--Middle Fork Judith (Middle Fork Ranch) and Holiday Camp trailhead. Both proposals are consistent with the ROS if located in grassy areas with few trees, if they require minimal or no earthwork, and if they revegetate quickly to grass. It is expected that both airstrips would meet these ROS requirements. They would also meet VQOs in this ROS setting, which can include; Modification, allowing the airstrip to visually dominate the setting as long as it borrows from naturally occurring form, line, color, and texture. However, the VQO for the Wilderness Study Area in which the Middle Fork Judith airstrip would be lengthened is Partial Retention. The airstrip would need to be constructed in such a way as to not visually dominate the landscape. This is likely very possible, given the flat grassy nature of the terrain.

Alternative 5 proposes both the Middle Fork Judith (Middle Fork Ranch) airstrip, and the Russian Flat airstrip. Both are consistent with the Roaded Natural Recreational Opportunity Spectrum setting. The Russian Flat proposal would create an airstrip in the park adjacent to Memorial Way Road 487 and the Russian Flat Campground. This airstrip proposal would likely meet a VQO of foreground Partial Retention if located where the airstrip is least discernable from the road. Aircraft parking visible from the road would defeat the purpose of this VQO, necessitating parking of aircraft out of view of the road. The airstrip would also parallel the non-motorized Trail 440 along Deadhorse Creek. Aircraft using the airstrip would be readily heard from this non-motorized trail. Nevertheless, the ROS setting of the trail is also Roaded Natural because of adjacent motorized routes.

Semi-primitive motorized (SPM) settings are typically more than ½-mile from roads, and are accessed by OHVs but not road vehicles. There is only one proposed airstrip in this setting. It is located at Deep Creek Park in Alternative 3. In this setting the airstrip would need to have minimal grading and clearing requirements and blend well with the existing landscape to be consistent with this ROS setting. The setting has the feeling of some remoteness and solitude, although the sights and sounds of motorized use will be evident, and access to them may be easy using OHVs. Scenery associated with this setting is usually natural-appearing and not modified by roads or the evidence of road construction. Partial Retention or Retention is associated with that setting (USDA Forest Service 1986 ROS

Handbook). Activities on the ground would not visually dominate the landscape setting, and would borrow from existing naturally occurring form, line, color, and texture, in the area. The Deep Creek Park airstrip will meet VQOs and ROS requirements if it is located to meet the above requirements. The setting would need to be flat, occur in an existing opening (most likely a park), and be grass-covered to match surrounding vegetation.

Semi-primitive nonmotorized (SPNM) settings are quiet and away from the sights and sounds associated with roads and motorized trails. There is one proposed airstrip in this setting--the Lost Fork of the Judith River in Alternative 3. In this ROS setting users typically feel more remote because non-motorized access requires more effort, while the motorized sounds of civilization are not present. Structures may occur in these settings, but are not accessed by motorized means. If there are roads in the area, they are either primitive or, if designed and constructed in the past, are not being maintained and are being allowed to go back to natural contours. Any activity in the area needs to meet Retention VQO (USDA Forest Service 1986 ROS Handbook), meaning it would not be visually evident. Airstrips and aircraft in this setting are unacceptable because of associated noise and motorized nature of aircraft, together with the potential visual impacts of airstrips with their associated grading, wind indicators, runway markings, possible grass mowing, and potential drainage structures. The expectation of remoteness, quiet, and solitude in this setting is not met when aircraft are able to fly into it and land.

Alternative 3's proposed Lost Fork Judith River airstrip is in direct conflict with the semi-primitive non-motorized nature of this ROS setting. Additionally, it may not meet the Forest plan VQO of Retention because of needed grading and vegetation removal. Lost Creek Trail 409 has an associated VQO of foreground Retention and middleground Partial Retention. If the trail is at least ½-mile distant, the VQO would be Partial Retention, which would likely be met by the airstrip. A field determination of whether this airstrip proposal would meet VQOs has not yet been made.

Recreation and potential for Illegal Outfitting.

a. Pilot recreation opportunities —Table III-10 shows which alternatives provide what ROS settings for pilots using proposed airstrips.

b. Effects of noise and sights to other recreationists by ROS setting —

Deep Creek Park—This semi-primitive motorized setting already has the sound of OHV traffic. Effects to adjacent recreationists would be proportional to the amount of use the airstrip receives. Off-highway-vehicle users indicate that other users do not disturb them.

Middle Fork Judith WSA (Middle Fork Ranch) — The setting is Roded Natural; the sights and sounds of motor vehicles and OHVs are already present in the area, although road vehicles in Alternative 3 would be more numerous. Aircraft landing at the Middle Fork Ranch airfield would have to fly at low altitudes over the Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized part of the WSA. The noise and sight of aircraft would significantly lessen solitude and the quiet nature of that ROS setting. Impacts to non-motorized recreationists are proportional to the amount of aircraft flying low-level over them, as well as the amount of recreation use in the SPNM setting. This proposal is partly on private land and partly on National Forest System lands. There is the potential for trespass; therefore, any airstrip expansion will need coordination between private

land owners and the Forest Service. This airstrip improvement would also improve private landowner access, which may improve the value of private land.

Middle Fork Judith WSA. (Lost Fork) — The users in this Semi-Primitive Non-motorized setting will be impacted by the sound and sight of low-flying aircraft landing within this setting, as well as aircraft that use the adjacent proposed Middle Fork Judith WSA (Ranch) airstrip. Amount of impact depends on the number of aircraft using both airstrips. Given the semi-primitive nature of this area, it will likely receive significant use if the airstrips are reconstructed.

Holiday Camp Trail Head — This is a roaded natural setting, with the present proposal being to place an airstrip immediately adjacent to the trailhead, in the same park the trailhead borders, and within sight and sound and close proximity to trailhead users. Aircraft landing and parking here will likely cause consternation with most non-aviation users of the trailhead because of associated noise, sights, smells, and concerns for safety. There are possible safety concerns with landing aircraft and stock at the trailhead. Support vehicles for aircraft could conflict with other recreationists by occupying sites at the trailhead. These conflicts could be largely mitigated if the airstrip were located out of sight and sound of the trailhead.

Russian Flat —The airstrip here would be in view and within hearing of the adjacent small Russian Flat campground, which would be impacted from aircraft landing or low flying overhead. Impacts to non-aviation recreationists would likely be less than at Holiday Camp, where the airstrip proposed parallels the trailhead. Users of the adjacent Road 487 could be affected when aircraft unexpectedly land in an otherwise natural setting. Their expectations of natural landscapes, including the park in which the airstrip is to be located, would be affected.

c. Potential for illegal outfitting. The Deep Creek Park proposal is less than one mile from a spike camp of a big game outfitter and in the middle of his permitted hunting area. This suggests that hunting in the area is good, raising the likelihood of illegal outfitting occurring when airplane passengers pay a pilot to scout for big game and drop them off at the airstrip the same day to hunt and to be picked up later. This illegal “livery” service would be very difficult to monitor and to enforce outfitter-guide permitting requirements, given the remoteness of the area. Such activity would be illegal unless the pilot is a licensed outfitter or works for one under a special use permit where such transportation is specifically allowed.

Alternative 3’s Middle Fork Judith Ranch, and Lost Fork Judith also provide opportunities for illegal outfitting that would be difficult to prevent. Lost Fork Judith would especially be prone to this activity because of the unroaded/nonmotorized nature of the proposed airstrip location. Here, illegal clients could take advantage of the setting to access an area that others can’t access by alternate motorized means.

The Holiday Camp airstrip of Alternative 3 is located near roads readily accessed by the public. It is not expected to cause illegal outfitting problems like the other alternatives.

One mitigation measure under Alternatives 3 and 5 would be to restrict recreational landings during hunting season 1 September to 1 December at any or all of the airstrips. This would eliminate the potential for illegal outfitting because the large majority of hunters using illegal outfitters would be unwilling to hunt outside the normal game season.

Hunters attempting to hunt outside normal hunting season would also find much less potential support from pilots taking them to the airstrip.

d. Smith River. The Deep Creek Park proposal in Alternative 3 will likely increase motorized use into the Smith River corridor because of its close proximity to the river, conflicting with US Forest Service and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks' desire to keep the corridor a largely non-motorized experience. The airstrip may increase the amount of low flying planes over the Smith River, to the detriment of recreationists on the river seeking a non-motorized experience. The airstrip would likely operate May to October when snow is absent.

Consistency with Forest Plan Management Areas. (See Table III-11)

Deep Creek Park, Middle Fork Judith, and Lost Fork Judith airstrips are all located well inside Management Area F (MA F). Management prescriptions for “improvements” in that MA state: “Improvements may consist of trailhead, parking facilities, and sanitation facilities at the **periphery** (bold letters added) of large undeveloped areas, or be limited to trailhead facilities along open roads” (Lewis and Clark Forest Plan). Airstrips are not specifically discussed within this management area. If an airstrip is considered a form of trailhead, that trailhead can only be located on the periphery of this management area. All three airstrips would be in conflict with this management prescription.

The Holiday Camp and Russian Flat airstrip proposals are in Management Area B, which does not limit the locations of trailheads, but does not specifically address airstrips as improvements. Neither airstrip is in conflict with the Forest Plan MA B direction.

Consistency with Wilderness Study Area (WSA). (See Table III-12)

Aircraft use of two airstrips in or immediately adjacent to the Middle Fork Judith WSA did occur in the past, as late as the early 1980s. Since then, the Lost Fork Judith area has been seriously impacted by erosion from a recent wildfire. Reestablishment of the airstrip as proposed in Alternative 3 would likely require use of machinery to level out the airstrip, as well as a possible access road for such machinery. Earthwork may be needed to reestablish the airstrip near Middle Fork Ranch. Access of heavy equipment up the Middle Fork of Judith River could be problematic. Construction work on both airstrips, including earthwork by heavy equipment and resultant impacts on topography and vegetation, would negatively affect the “apparent naturalness” factor used in judging suitability of an area to become wilderness. Airstrip establishment would reintroduce the noise and sight of low flying aircraft into the area, reducing the area’s “solitude” or feeling of “isolation” from the sights, sounds, presence of others, and human development. It would also reduce its feeling of “remoteness,” or the perception of being secluded, inaccessible, and out of the way.

As discussed in the introduction, it is possible that reestablishment of airstrips in a Wilderness Study Area could become irretrievable if national legislation (presently introduced) makes it difficult or impossible to close existing airstrips on National Forest System lands.

The combination of the above effects would affect the suitability of this area for potential wilderness designation. Alternative 3 would have the greatest impact because it proposed two airstrips in the WSA, while Alternative 5 proposes one.

2. Cumulative Effects

Airstrips are another means of providing motorized access to the Forest. Noise associated with motorized recreation comes from aircraft, road vehicles, and OHVs. In Alternatives 3 and 5, the sounds and sights of low-flying and landing aircraft will combine with the sights and sounds of road vehicle and OHV use. Increased population over time and a reduction in available non-motorized recreation settings will combine to make these airstrips more heavily used with time, reducing the value of adjacent non-motorized ROS settings. National legislation could make these commitments to new airstrips irretrievable. Increased future development of private lands in the Middle Fork, combined with new airstrips and easier access for private landowners having aircraft, will combine to reduce over time the suitability of the WSA for wilderness.

c. Effects Common To All Alternatives or All Action Alternatives

1. Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects

There are no effects common to all alternatives or to all action alternatives.

