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Comments: The Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF) made me aware of possible changes (proposed action) to the airstrips in the Nez-Clearwater National Forest.

I've flown through the area, but has always been in winter, (or in an airplane unsuited to land there) and I wasn't able to use the airstrips. I would certainly like to do so in the near future, however!

I became a member of the RAF because of their work on preserving and maintaining access to the back country airstrips--something that is very important to me. The RAF is recognized nationwide for work--not only for their advocacy, but for their "leave no trace" environmental work--actively maintaining and cleaning up back country airstrips.

It is this commitment to responsible back-country access by air that forms the background on my comments. Unlike other forms of transportation, airstrips leave no footprint--no ruts--no trails. They contribute only a few seconds of noise while taking off--nothing more. Even hiking (with associated trails) is not as environmentally friendly.

Unlike so many advocates that seek to "improve" access by "doing more"--all users of the back country airstrips ask is that they be maintained as they have been--in most cases, as they have been for decades. Idaho has an active Aeronautics Department--and they set the standards for airstrips within the State. Those existing standards have served well for decades--I recommend adoption of Idaho standards for airstrips as the basis for safe and functional operation. Should any other airstrips be included in the future to handle any growth in use, I would recommend that any new airstrips conform to Idaho standards for construction and safety.

I understand that there are two Special Management Areas located within the proposal. Including the existing airstrips with these areas is commendable and important. Often times, the sticking point for back country airstrips is the question of "What if the airstrip needs maintenance? Can motorized vehicles be used in these special cases?" Given that the airstrips have been in use for decades demonstrates that they require only minimal maintenance, it seems only fair that the same equipment used to maintain trails, bridges, and back country cabins be included in the description of allowed uses to maintain the airstrips.

All back country airstrips can be important for firefighting aircraft and helicopters--or for medical evacuation. Back-country airstrips are not only tourist attractions, but often provide the only way that some people (elderly, handicapped, or families with small children) can access the wilderness areas.

Back country airstrips are receiving a lot of favorable press now nationwide in many aviation magazines (including the magazines I write for). As proponents of back country access, we are only asking for the airstrips to be maintained AS THEY ARE (subject to Idaho aviation guidelines).

Jim Hanson

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Midwest Flyer magazine