



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary  
Washington, D.C. 20250

SEP 16 2013

The Honorable James Moran  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2252 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Moran:

Enclosed is the Forest Service's general assessment of back-country airstrips on National Forest System lands with recommendations for improving their function as an important component of the forest transportation and recreation system. Congress required the Forest Service to submit this report in the FY 2012 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, Conference Report 112-331.

In compliance with section 435 of Public Law 111-88, after 45 days, this report will be posted to the Forest Service website at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/aboutus/budget/congressional-directives.shtml>.

A similar letter and report are being sent to Congressman Simpson and Senators Reed and Murkowski.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Tom J. Vilsack", is positioned above the printed name and title of the Secretary.

Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary

Enclosure



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SEP 16 2013

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
709 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Murkowski:

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The Honorable Jack Reed  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
728 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Enclosed is the Forest Service's general assessment of back-country airstrips on National Forest System lands with recommendations for improving their function as an important component of the forest transportation and recreation system. Congress required the Forest Service to submit this report in the FY 2012 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, Conference Report 112-331.

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SEP 16 2013

The Honorable Michael K. Simpson  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2312 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

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## **Backcountry Airstrips Assessment August 2013**

### **Background**

The Forest Service has completed an inventory of 84 back-country airstrips owned or operated on National Forest System (NFS) lands, located predominately in the western United States as follows:

<i>Region</i>	<i>Airstrips</i>
<b>Northern</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Southwestern</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Intermountain</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Pacific Southwest</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Pacific Northwest</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Eastern</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Alaska</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>

These airstrips are generally located in remote locations with few or limited facilities and are used for a variety of purposes, including administrative and recreation access to NFS lands and fire operations. Only 15 of the airstrips are located within Congressionally designated wilderness areas. Some of the airstrips are managed under special use permit by State aviation agencies and other partners.

Each airstrip was evaluated as to its current condition, and then an assessment was made as to whether actions are needed to improve their function. The Forest Service's evaluation of airstrips is consistent with a classification scheme developed and used in Idaho by the Idaho Aviation Network.

### Assessment of Condition:

Using the Idaho Aviation Network classification scheme, the 84 back-country airstrips can be categorized as follows:

<i>Category</i>	<i>Airstrips</i>
<b>Closed</b> <i>(Currently closed to use by aircraft)</i>	7
<b>Wild</b> <i>(Airstrips with no facilities, accessible only by air or trail)</i>	9
<b>Primitive</b> <i>(Airstrips with few or limited facilities, generally in a remote location, though may be accessible by road)</i>	42
<b>Developed</b> <i>(Airstrips with some facilities or with a higher degree of improvement, generally accessible by road)</i>	15
<b>Community</b> <i>(Airstrips with a higher degree of improvements, usually providing access to small communities in the National Forests)</i>	11
<b>Total</b>	84

In addition to the 7 airstrips closed to use, 2 airstrips have restrictions on use, and 19 have hazardous conditions present in the various categories of the matrix. Regardless of classification, maintenance needs for all airstrips typically consist of mowing; periodic leveling; replacement of navigation aids; seeding, vegetative and wildlife control; and campsite maintenance.

### Recommendations

Airstrip managers identified increased frequency of mowing each year, periodic leveling, and replacement of navigation aids as the most important items to maintain or improve airstrip functionality. The Forest Service is currently reviewing the following to determine which, if any, of the following actions may support or enhance the long-term viability and functionality of airstrips on the national forests:

1. Explore opportunities for development of partnerships that meet mutual objectives of safely maintaining and operating airstrips for designated use.
2. Explore opportunities to operate airstrips under special use permit to entities such as state aviation agencies.
3. Explore opportunities to work cooperatively with representatives of the aviation public and state aviation agencies, to assess the long-term need for each airstrip and subsequent maintenance requirements and resource needs. Based on these assessments determine what, if any, actions to take.