

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Statement

UTAH BACK COUNTRY PILOTS ASSOCIATION

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Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to address this committee. My name is Steve Durtschi. I work as a Process Engineer on solid rocket propellants for a defense contractor in Salt Lake City. I am also a commercial and instrument-rated private pilot. I have come a long way at personal expense for the privilege of voicing an opinion on the merits of H.R. 3661. I figure my testimony is costing roughly one hundred and fifty dollars per minute. I believe in standing for something and so it is worth every penny.

I am here today representing the Utah Back Country Pilots Association. The UBCP has a membership of 325 pilots and enthusiasts in Utah and surrounding states. Our Mission Statement is to firstly promote air safety. In support of this goal, we assemble and disseminate available information on what might be termed "back country" landing strips. These are the airports located in the more remote areas of the western states. We also serve as a volunteer group in maintaining and enhancing the safety at many of these locations. Many of the thoughts which I present today are those suggested as I canvassed our group in preparing this testimony.

I wish I could convey in the few minutes allotted to me my passion for and enjoyment my family and I have realized over the years in being able to access some of the scenic beauty of the west in our airplane. If we won a trip to Disneyland today, we would most certainly trade it for one night in our tent under the wing after burnt hamburger and semi-raw potatoes cooked in tin foil. We have been most fortunate in being able to roll our wheels from manicured grass strips in the mountains to the dusty runways in red rock canyons.

Idaho has some two dozen of these landing strips in wilderness areas alone. The Frank Church River of No Return and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness areas both contain public landing strips open to private airplanes. Many of these are maintained in safe operating condition by public volunteers. This area of Idaho has become a show place for the nation, demonstrating how some of the most sensitive lands in the west can be managed in pristine condition for a hundred generations and yet still allow the public reasonable access. I recently browsed a Swiss aviation publication and while I could not read the words, there was a beautiful full-page photograph of the Big Creek Landing Strip, east of McCall, Idaho with the Invitation Title: "Fly Idaho!".

The deserts and canyon country of Utah also contain a handful of airports that beckon the back country aviator. Our director of State Aeronautics, Bob Barrett, has already spoken of their obvious value for search

and rescue efforts and the peace of mind the cross country traveler feels as they quietly slide under the wings during a long trip in otherwise very airplane un-friendly terrain. To me and many other pilots they are a treasure; a resource to our state that deserves defending.

Unfortunately, these landing strips are under attack. There are folks working night and day with the sole purpose of seeing these strips obliterated forever. As an example, many of my friends and I used the landing strip at Taylor Flat on the Green River 10 miles downstream from the Flaming Gorge Dam. The strip was located on BLM land next to private recreational housing development. There were no complaints concerning its use. In 1997 a sign was posted at the entrance to the strip that said in part, "...due to lack of interest and a qualified applicant to maintain the strip, the Taylor Flat Landing Strip is closed." Daggett County officials notified the BLM that they would immediately perform any required maintenance on the landing strip and would maintain any required liability insurance. The UBCP supplied data to show that there was hardly a lack of interest in the strip and that it was being and had been used by many people. The BLM conducted an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and found no significant impacts. In fact, while the EIS was in progress, the BLM was constructing a camp ground complete with paved RV hook-ups a few miles from the landing strip. During the public comment period, to my knowledge, not one dissenting letter was registered with the BLM while dozens wrote desiring to keep the landing strip intact. The BLM Supervisor denied all requests to use the air field,

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citing his desire to not sacrifice 5 acres of sage brush. A grader was dispatched and several deep gouges cut, rendering the strip useless.

With slight variation, the story has been the same at other Utah locations. With no advance notice, the BLM used heavy equipment to drag logs across the landing field at Dolores Point on the border of Utah and Colorado. The Mexican Mountain Landing Strip now inside the Mexican Mountain Wilderness Study Area (WSA) has been continuously used by pilots since it was constructed in the 1960s. The US Department of Interior pamphlet entitled *Protecting Your Wilderness Study Areas* says that any activities conducted prior to the passage of the Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976 creating the WSAs are "grandfathered" and allowed to continue, but the BLM has indicated they will cite any pilot now using the landing strip. (I should mention that I have no ax to grind with the BLM. I believe that they are responding to a few vocal extremist groups).

Attacks on Utah landing strips come from other camps, too. In 1999, after resolving every potential issue over an almost two year period, the BLM EIS found no significant impact and issued a right of way lease for the landing strip at Mineral Bottom north of Canyonlands National Park. Extremist groups immediately filed law suits which persist from every legal angle to this day, even though the airport is not on what even they consider to be lands with wilderness character. I could cite similar attacks and airport closures in California and Idaho.

I mentioned earlier my personal passion for flight and what a great privilege it is to combine this with my love of the out doors. Aviation has been a source of national pride for nearly a century. The Wright brothers invented controlled flight. Aviation has been the currency with which we purchased our technological dominance. My heroes are Jimmy Dolittle, Neil Armstrong, and Roscoe Turner. My love of aviation is interwoven with the basic desire all share to be in open space. The freedom to move about unencumbered is irresistible, and I treasure it deeply. I recently read that after a ten year review, a man in Shanghai, the People's Republic of China was issued a private pilots license. This brings the total private pilots in China to

41. It is little wonder there is a difference between our two countries.

I consider the airplane to be well-suited to visit sensitive lands. Consider that it does not leave a rutted landscape, nor does it graze its way from place to place. Only foot prints leave the air field. The UBCP advocates "leave no trace" camping - a practice rigorously followed in the Idaho Wilderness. The noise is transitory - a short hike from the air field and it cannot be heard at all. I do not believe that there should be a landing strip in every canyon; Utah is still a very large place with enough open space for every desire.

A few years ago we were camped at Chamberlain Basin, near the Salmon River in Idaho. The early morning silence was broken by a Cessna 206, followed by another, then another. As I watched curiously, about 12 young people were un-loaded and helped into wheel chairs. For perhaps an hour they had their own wilderness experience, some blowing into tubes to maneuver. These youngsters could have visited the wilderness in no other way. (The far-sighted Senator Frank Church was right when he said. "It was never the intent of Congress that wilderness be managed in so pure a fashion as to needlessly restrict customary use and enjoyment. On the contrary, wilderness should be managed to allow its use by a wide spectrum of Americans".) I later learned the airplanes were flown by volunteers. Needless to say, the noise - gone as fast as it came - was not objectionable.

H.R. 3661 will preserve this privilege to visit the back country. We are bound by the Federal Air Regulations any time we operate an airplane at these fields. Why not give these airports the Federal protection they deserve?

A key ingredient of this bill is the public involvement it fosters. As a recently initiated couple to the political process, my wife and I are proud to be representing our neighbors at the county convention in April. Our party platform reads in part, "We believe that citizens needs are best met through private initiative and volunteerism". The Utah Back Country Pilots Association could not agree more. We do not believe in "entitlements". As pilots who love the out doors, the government does not owe us a thing. We simply ask that they mandate some guidelines and then politely step aside. Many groups such as ours ask only for the opportunity to roll up their sleeves and put their talents and wallets where their hearts are.

This bill will allow just that. The public is at the ready to adopt these landing strips and maintain them in safe operating condition. The state of Idaho has had a similar program for years. This will allow us the

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experience of the stewardship of a valuable resource and pass the freedom of flight to our children in one civic gesture.

The Utah Back Country Pilots Association supports H.R. 3661. It contains no hidden agenda. As I have shown, the laws governing these landing strips at present are inadequate and open to individual interpretation by many agencies. This bill will bring these strips all under one management team. It is a rational and sensible way to manage airports on public lands. I sincerely hope this committee will thoughtfully consider this matter and expedite signing it into law. Thank you.

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