

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Statement

Testimony Provided By
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Division of Aeronautics
before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
Hearing on H.R. 3661, The General Aviation Access Act
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Statement

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. My name is Robert Barrett. I am currently serving as the Director of the Utah Division of Aeronautics, a division of the Utah Department of Transportation. I have come to testify before this subcommittee and to present a printed statement for inclusion in the Congressional Record in behalf of H.R. 3661, the General Aviation Access Act.

My division is responsible for administering all federal and state funding for public-use airports in the state of Utah. We conduct safety and compliance, pavement condition, and FAA 5010 inspections and we license all public-use airports in the state. We redistribute, in accordance with state law, portions of the state aviation fuel taxes collected throughout Utah back to the airports for use by sponsors in conjunction with locally budgeted funds for meeting airport operating and maintenance costs and local matching shares for federal and state construction and maintenance grants.

In addition to our responsibilities with Utah's public-use airports, we operate a small fleet of airplanes to provide air transportation services to elected and appointed officials and state government employees who must travel in pursuit of the state's business. As such, I am indeed fortunate to be able to continue using my past military and civilian pilot experience to participate in flying our passengers over some of the most spectacular scenery that exists anywhere in this great country of ours and, in fact, in the entire world. Our other pilots and I may tend to take for granted the beauty of the Utah wilderness areas, since we experience them so often, but the frequent oohs and ahhs of our passengers bring back the reality of that beauty, and drive home to each of us how truly fortunate we are to be able to fly in such a place. John Gillespie Magee's epic poem of flight, entitled *High Flight*, comes to mind, for there is no other place in my experience where a flyer can so readily reach out and "touch the face of God."

The General Aviation Access Act is very important to all who fly over the wilderness areas of Utah and many other states, particularly the western states, where large parcels of land are administered by the federal government, where vast areas exist completely within FAA designated mountainous terrain, where airports are few and far between and population densities are low. In Utah, the uranium boom days of the 1950s and 1960s left a mark on the wilderness in the form of numerous back country landing strips which were bladed out in the canyons and river bottoms and on the remote mesa tops to support and resupply the prospectors. Most of these are unimproved dirt strips, 1000 to 2000 feet long, with no associated roads, no services, no based airplanes and no people. On the Utah Aeronautical Charts which I have provided as Exhibit 1, you will find many of these landing strips designated by a small circle or by an "R" with a circle around it. You will see other areas of the state where there are no marked airfields of any kind. But they are there, in most of those remote areas, in the form of back country airstrips.

These airstrips are important to general aviation pilots because they represent a safe haven in the wilderness when faced with a sudden engine failure in a single engine aircraft, or some other emergency situation that requires getting a small airplane on the ground right now. In our last revision to the state aeronautical chart and the airport directory on the reverse side, we began to identify some of these landing strips, so that pilots will know where they are located and will have sufficient information to be able to reach one of them in an emergency and make a safe landing. Such emergencies do not happen often, but when they do, the pilot of a small single-engine aircraft flying over mountainous terrain needs to have a place to land, or he and his passengers will likely become accident statistics. These back country strips serve an essential safety role as emergency landing areas.

These back country landing strips serve a great recreational purpose, as well. You will hear testimony from Mr. Steven Durtschi, the President of the Utah Back Country Pilots Association, about how these back country strips make available to the physically disabled and others who cannot hike in, the unparalleled beauties of the remote wilderness of Utah and other states that I have described. You will learn from his first-hand experiences what it means to those who are able to enjoy the wilderness only because of aviation. I will leave this to Mr. Durtschi's capable narration.

These back country landing strips can also serve important functions in the areas of search and rescue, firefighting, forest and ecological management, wildlife management and research and aerial mapping. I am not an expert in these areas, so I will leave the details of this utility to those who are.

I would now like to address two specific issues that have been raised by various environmental interest groups in opposition to the passage of H.R. 3661. First, the allegation has been made that these landing strips would become the regular and frequent destinations of aircraft of the drug cartels transporting their popular and deadly recreational drugs into Utah for distribution throughout the state and into nearby states. Nothing could be further from reality. These landing strips, while a welcome sight for a pilot of a small single engine airplane in distress, are not suitable, either in length or in the strength and surface smoothness of the runways, for the larger multi-engine and turboprop aircraft which have the speed and range necessary to transport drugs from outside the country or even outside the state. While the drug runners have shown that they don't mind throwing away expensive aircraft on a one-way trip to their desired destinations, I don't believe that they have expressed any desire to throw away their pilots in the process. Taking a Super King Air B200 or other turboprop aircraft into a 1200 foot long sand and sagebrush runway in a box canyon would be a recipe for a serious crash landing at best, and more likely a sure fatality for all aboard. Furthermore, since most of these landing strips are many miles from the nearest roads, even if drug runners could get their cargo safely on the ground, transporting any significant volume of drugs would pose enormous logistical problems.

Secondly, those opposed to any use of these landing strips have alleged that each of them would become busy weekend destinations for hordes of private pilots who would turn the wilderness into vast public campgrounds. That, also, is simply not going to happen. Again, while back country landing strips could represent a life-saving option for a pilot of a small single engine aircraft in distress facing as his or her only alternative a crash in unforgiving mountainous terrain, for the most part they will never be the preferred destination of more than a relative handful of highly skilled and highly experienced back country pilots who own the specific types of aircraft which are properly designed and built to fly into and out of unimproved strips in rough terrain. The average recreational flyer or low-experience private pilot has neither the training nor the skills nor would he likely have access to the equipment that he would need to routinely fly into these wilderness landing strips. Any given landing strip would likely see, on average, no more than one or two landings and takeoffs in any one week period. Those few minutes of noise over a very limited distance from the strip would be the only environmental impact that would occur.

Now, I would like to discuss for a moment the steps that my division, as the state aviation authority in Utah, would propose to take if H.R. 3661 becomes law. First of all, I would pledge to work with the Bureau of Land Management and the National Forest Service, who administer the lands where most of Utah's back country strips are located, and with the FAA, the Utah Back Country Pilots Association, various environmental interest groups and other potential users to determine which back country strips are most essential to the safety of general aviation and other appropriate recreational and utilitarian needs. I do not believe that all of the existing back country strips need to be preserved, and so we would develop a plan to eliminate those that are not needed and to allow them to be returned to natural wilderness.

No use of federal Airport Improvement Program funds nor state appropriated airport construction and maintenance funds would be used for the restoration or preservation of back country airstrips. We would enlist the aid of the back country pilots and other private citizen groups who love the wilderness to "adopt an airstrip" and to take responsibility for the restoration and upkeep of those back country strips which would be designated for preservation. The back country pilots have already assumed this responsibility for several of these strips in Utah, with the blessing of the BLM, and have done an admirable job of restoring a number of them to safe useability with no adverse impact upon the environment. Pilots, in general, and pilots who love to fly into the back country specifically, are very sensitive to the environment and its preservation. These people love the tremendous natural beauty of the environment and want to preserve it for the enjoyment of many, as opposed to the environmental interest groups who seem to be interested in preserving it only for those who have the time, resources and inclination to visit the wilderness on foot. Maintenance of these landing strips would consist primarily of clearing away brush, filling ditches on the runway resulting from the previous Spring's erosion and removing boulders, trees or other obstacles which may have fallen, rolled or been blown across the landing area. Only those tools that could be transported in a small aircraft would be available for use.

In summary, let me emphasize once again that the preservation of and access to some of the back country or wilderness area landing strips in Utah and many other states is in the best interest of all of the citizens of this great country, and especially to those who fly single engine aircraft or who have a love of and a desire to view the scenic beauty of our country's great natural wonders. Preservation is also essential to such utilitarian purposes as search and rescue, firefighting and wildlife management. These landing strips can be maintained without expense to taxpayers and with no environmental impact beyond a very few minutes of aircraft engine noise which could be heard over a very limited distance.

I would conclude that H.R. 3661 is a good bill, and that its passage would provide long term benefits to the

citizens of the United States and to visitors from other countries. The cost and detrimental effects of its passage would be so small as to be virtually immeasurable. I recommend to the subcommittee its passage with a favorable recommendation to the House of Representatives, and strong support of passage in the Senate and by the President. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to your deliberations and for your attention to my testimony. I would be happy to address any questions that you may have at this time.

Exhibits

1. Utah Aeronautical Chart
2. Utah Airport Directory (located on the reverse side of the Aeronautical Chart)

The following back country landing strips are shown on the current issue of the Aeronautical Chart and in the Airport Directory. Other strips will be added in future revisions to the Airport Directory as they are brought to a more suitable condition for emergency use.

- Cedar Mountain
- Fry Canyon
- Needles Outpost
- Sand Wash

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