



IDAHO BACKCOUNTRY FLYING WILDERNESS USE AND STEWARDSHIP

(Adapted from *Wilderness Use Whitepaper AH 9 2022: Some Info About Idaho Backcountry Flying*)

For the purpose of this report, backcountry flying does not include off-airport operations, STOL drag competitions, or float operations. Rather, backcountry flight operations use established airstrips in and around the Idaho Wilderness areas.

Over the past decade or so Central Idaho has seen an almost exponential growth in the number of recreational pilots who come to enjoy backcountry flying. As this flying has become more popular, associated risks have increased and there is potential for more accidents and incidents. Anecdotal evidence suggests there are many mishaps that go unreported. In addition to increasing the risk for general aviation pilots, increased use has also seen a surge in improper and/or illegal aviation activities in wilderness areas. This has the potential to limit access to airstrips in these areas. In Idaho, there are many such airstrips in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness and others in the Gospel Hump Wilderness and Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

The [Wilderness Act of 1964](#) prohibits aircraft operations in any wilderness area designated by the Act. In the Frank Church Wilderness area, the [Central Idaho Wilderness Act of 1980](#) allowed airstrips that were already in use to remain open. The Act specifies the only access allowed is by horse, boat, foot, or air.

Frank Church Wilderness National Forests and Net Acreage

Table 1.1 National Forests and Net Acreage in Wilderness ([page 5 FC-RONRW Management Plan](#))

Bitterroot	193,703 acres
Boise	332,891 acres
Challis	515,421 acres
Nez Perce	110,773 acres
Payette	791,675 acres
Salmon	421,433 acres
Total acreage	2,365,896

Source: Land Areas of the National Forest System, September 2001



The United States Forest Service (USFS) and other managing agencies regulate both commercial and private operations, including rafting, horsemen, hunting, fishing, and other recreational uses.

Commercial hunting, horse packing, rafting, and outfitting are all required to have special use permits. Private hunters and rafters are also required to obtain permits for one-time use (for example the lottery system used on the rivers). The USFS has attempted in the past to require special use permits for commercial aviation users (including flight instruction). FAR Part 135 operators that serve the wilderness transport other users (hunters, outfitters, hikers, rafters, and backcountry ranches) exist within the wilderness under the “Grandfather Clause.”

The USFS has already closed airstrips and attempted to close others within the wilderness. They have also issued citations violating commercial aircraft operations they deemed unapproved commercial use at various airstrips in the wilderness (for example, ticketing helicopters sent to recover wrecked airplanes at airstrips in the wilderness). A consortium of users has pushed back on the USFS over the years and continue to do so. One example of this was when the forest service attempted to close Cabin Creek airstrip after it washed out in a flood, and a concerted effort was launched by volunteers and commercial operators to lobby against the forest service until they agreed to repair the strip and reopen it.

The reality is that the United States Forest Service has the authority to limit access, close airstrips, and require use permits if they deem it necessary. All users would be impacted, not just aviation.

Local back country pilots and instructors understand and respect this and conduct much of the backcountry flight training outside the wilderness areas. There are many excellent backcountry airstrips in areas that surround the wilderness that are not subject to the same rules and restrictions. For training purposes, wilderness strips should be used only for a “checkout” to a particular strip. However, many users—particularly from out of state—do not follow that practice. This needs to be an integral part of any backcountry flying discussion, i.e. wilderness strip use should follow the same regulations as trail heads. They are access points, and not to be used extensively for training or for pilots to fly around and “bag airstrips” for the sake of landing and taking off at multiple locations inside the wilderness. Additionally, fly-ins with related contests or exhibitions are specifically prohibited (see page 83 of the Frank Church Wilderness Management Plan). Following is some background information regarding aviation use in the Frank Church Wilderness.

The [1984 Frank Church Management Plan, Section III, I. 2](#) specifically addresses aviation. Among the issues are aviation’s impact on other uses. Here’s an excerpt from page 79:



“The problems and concerns related to aircraft use are associated with the need to minimize the adverse effects of it on the wilderness resource. Aircraft use and related activities, including air traffic, landing strip maintenance, and noise, all tend to degrade the wilderness setting and experience. The existence of landing strips, and aircraft activity, are used to rationalize other uses and activities that further impact the wilderness resource and experience.”

Subsection C.5 (page 81) states the forest service will work with other groups to:

“Reduce noise impacts of aircraft overflights.

- a) Inform and educate pilots on wilderness protection.
- b) Work with FAA, State of Idaho Division of Aeronautics, and air taxi operators to cooperate in reducing low level operations over the Wilderness.”

In addition, the current Wilderness Plan addresses aviation in [Chapter 2, Section V. Aviation.](#) and the entire Wilderness Plan and FEIS documents can be found [here.](#)

The past several years has seen a marked increase in low level flying, formation flying, and “gaggle flying” in the Idaho Wilderness areas. Groups of as many as 15 aircraft have been observed flying low over the rivers (less than 500 ft agl and sometimes less than 100 feet over rafters), doing multiple takeoffs and landings at wilderness strips, harassing wildlife and other wilderness users, and generally not following any kind of safety protocols or rules governing wilderness use. At times other pilots have had to make position reports regarding these groups of aircraft since the formation flights often communicate with one another on a discreet frequency, are preoccupied with filming, and do not make position reports on 122.9. Those groups have caused problems by doing formation takeoffs and landings at wilderness strips and parking large numbers of aircraft on small airstrips, creating a hazard for other aircraft and blocking access. Unfortunately, most efforts to try and reason with some of these groups, or educate them, has met with derision and outright hostility from those pilots.

The activities just described are not only bad etiquette but present significant safety issues and jeopardize future access for all users—those activities could be the driving force that motivates the United States Forest Service to limit access, require permits for all aviation users, and even close airstrips.

Another issue that has arisen over the past several years is related to commercial videoing of flights in wilderness areas and at designated wilderness strips. Commercial filming as defined in 36 CFR § 251.51 is prohibited without a special use authorization permit (private or state airstrips in the wilderness are the exception). The USFS can interpret any YouTube or other video to be illegal if used in conjunction with a commercial application—something that is violated on a regular basis by companies and individuals who use videos, social media,



YouTube, etc. to promote their businesses. Use of drones is not permitted in any wilderness area, regardless of the application.

Working together, general aviation pilots can help mitigate risks and contribute to sustained access by using wilderness airstrips as they are intended. If a pilot lands at an airstrip in the wilderness they need to follow the wilderness management plan use guidelines that specify the strips are access points/trail heads. That means take a hike, go fishing, camp overnight, and help keep the airstrips open for future pilots to enjoy and for other users such as rafters, hunters, hikers, and outfitters to have aviation access to the wilderness.