

LEGAL NOTICE

REQUEST FOR COMMENTS
USDA FOREST SERVICE

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Cabin Creek Airstrip - Water Run-Off Damage

The Cabin Creek airstrip, on the Payette National Forest within the Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness, was damaged by overflow from Cow Creek during the period of June 6 - 12. The resulting damage rendered the airfield unuseable, and the airfield has been officially closed to aircraft operations for safety reasons with the concurrence of the State of Idaho.

Repair of the airfield would require movement of approximately 1500 cubic yards of fill material. In addition, preventative measures to protect the airstrip from a future occurrence would require additional channelization of Cow Creek, with a backup system of overflow ditches and dykes.

The Forest Service is initiating review of response options, and conducting an evaluation of the resource impacts as directed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Relevant statutory direction, policy and plan direction will be considered as part of the evaluation.

The proposed Forest Service action is repair of the Cabin Creek airstrip to its previously operating standards using non-motorized, non-mechanized methods. This course of action would restore the operational capability of the airfield while being sensitive to Wilderness management direction by employing the "minimum necessary tool" to accomplish the task. Two approaches to non-motorized, non-mechanized repair have been identified: 1. use of horse drawn equipment (slips & fresnos) or 2. use of hydraulic fill techniques, that is movement of fill material with water and sluice methods.

Other possible alternatives that have been identified and will be considered as part of the evaluation are: 1. No Action, 2. Restore Cabin Creek airstrip to previous operational standards using motorized/mechanized equipment, 3. Provide comparable and reasonable alternative(s) means of access to the area.

Implementation of any action selected as a result of the evaluation will depend on funding availability. Initial cost estimates for the proposed action (repair using non-motorized, non-mechanized methods) range between \$40,000 - \$65,000. It is anticipated that work would be completed by contract. Availability of a contractor able to do the job may also be controlling. Time frames for repair under the proposed action, once a decision is made, and a contract issued, is estimated to be 50 - 120 days.

**CABIN CREEK AIRSTRIP
STATUS REPORT**

The Cabin Creek airstrip was severely damaged by runoff from Cow Creek during the week of June 7-10. Due to the extreme safety hazard, the airstrip has been closed to use, with the concurrence of the State of Idaho.

FOREST SERVICE ACTION

The Forest Service has initiated the decision making process to define a response to this event. The magnitude of the damage, involving a loss of an estimated 1200 cubic yards of fill and surface material, makes a repair effort more than "routine" maintenance.

Forest Service specialists in engineering, wildlife, fish, soils, hydrology, Wilderness management, cultural resources and aviation have visited, or will be visiting, Cabin Creek and will be involved in developing and evaluating Forest Service response options.

The location of Cabin Creek in a Wilderness and in an area which provides critical habitat for chinook salmon, bull trout and western cutthroat, coupled with the quantity of the fill necessary to repair the airstrip, requires careful evaluation of the resource consequences from any action. This includes consideration of the effect on users for any possible action.

The 1964 Wilderness Act and the 1980 Central Idaho Wilderness Act (CIWA) that established the Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness both provide for continued use of existing public airstrips. The CIWA directs that no aircraft landing strip in regular use at the time the Act was adopted, shall be permanently closed or rendered unserviceable, except for reasons of extreme danger, and in such cases the State of Idaho must concur.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Over 100 comments have been received in response to the Forest Service request for input. The initial Forest Service proposal, to repair the airstrip to its previous operating parameters using non-motorized (horse drawn) equipment, will be compared to other possible options. Public input to date has been overwhelmingly in support of the repair of the Cabin Creek airstrip and in the most expedient manner possible. Most comments appear to favor flying in motorized equipment to do the necessary work. There have been offers to provide assistance in the repair effort. A minority of the public comments support repair of the airstrip by the use of non-motorized means.

Generally the use of motorized equipment is prohibited in Wilderness, and there is no special provision for repair or maintenance of airfields. The 1964 Wilderness Act provides for the use of motorized equipment where "necessary to meet the minimum requirements for administration of the area for the purpose of this Act".

A few letters were received that suggest we focus on providing a shorter airstrip, reducing the fill requirements and making repair work easier. Some letters have suggested that the airstrip be abandoned; that the cost of repair is not justified, it is not a needed facility to provide access and/or it is counter to a Wilderness experience/environment.

THE PROCESS CONTINUED

The involved resource specialists recently met and will be preparing the necessary reports as a base for preparation of the required documentation. It is projected that an Environmental Assessment (EA) will be prepared leading to a Decision Notice. In addition several other actions will be necessary and occurring concurrently, including for example, consultation with National Marine Fisheries Service regarding potential impacts on salmon, cultural resource inventories with State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) review, and preparation of necessary Biological Evaluations for fish, wildlife and plants to ensure compliance with the Threatened & Endangered Species Act.

Considering on-going work and other priorities, a draft EA is not likely to be available before September. The EA will receive pre-decisional review for a 30 day period after completion of a public draft. Based on public comment the EA may be revised prior to a Decision. After a final EA is prepared and a Decision Notice issued there will be a 45 day appeal period. An optimistic time frame for having a final decision on the long term Forest Service response to the Cabin Creek airstrip damage is the first part of calendar year 1997.

Funding for implementing a decision for repair work at Cabin Creek has not been identified. All options to conduct the work consistent with the final decision, including any mitigation measures, will be considered. The initial thought is to contract any work, however this would be funding dependent and there may be other viable options depending on the constraints of the final decision.

In the meantime, the Forest Service will take measures to avoid any further damage to the airstrip. Work will be done to ensure that runoff will be intercepted during the period while a decision defining long term action is being developed.