

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY**May 30, 2009**

## Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

BADLEY RANCH, Idaho — When the Postal Service began scouring the map to help close a potential \$6.5 billion budget deficit, an auditor's eye settled on central Idaho. The agency had been spending \$46,000 a year for a challenging small-plane route that served about 20 addresses secluded in the roadless wilderness of the northern Rocky Mountains.

"We determined that the cost of delivery here was about 10 times the average cost of delivery," said Al DeSarro, a spokesman for the service.

This spring, the scattered neighbors here on the Salmon River got the news: They would have to find their way out to asphalt America and turn the key on a post office box. In the summer they could face hours of hiking and dirt-road driving; in the winter the journey would be all but impossible.

The cold dose of reality was just settling in when John E. Potter, the postmaster general, began getting calls, letters and e-mail messages from the owners of ranches on the river. People showed up on Capitol Hill in rafting sandals and cowboy boots.

Then, just before Mr. Potter was about to face a conference call with the four members of Idaho's Congressional delegation, he decided that the high-flying weekly route through the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, in place for more than half a century and the last air route into a wilderness area in the continental United States, should best be left as is.

"We considered other alternatives, including surface routes," Mr. Potter wrote in a letter to Representative Walt Minnick, Democrat of Idaho, "and determined that none would provide acceptable service levels to us or our customers. Therefore, I have decided that in view of the obligation to provide service to the American public, this contract should continue in its present form."

What that appears to mean — beyond questions of fiscal prudence, private ownership on public land and the effectiveness of Congressional intervention — is that on Wednesdays in the Idaho wilderness, Ray will still be on the way.

At 72, with arthritic hands, a stooped gait and an easy smile, Ray Arnold is cool in the tiny cockpit of a Cessna 185. Even when the winds rip through the canyons. Even when the wing tips almost brush the dry needles of the Ponderosa pines. Ask him what type of rock is jutting from the cliff face just outside the window a few thousand feet up and he responds, "Hard."

For 34 years, Mr. Arnold has been pilot and mailman. Same route. Same vast expanse of snowcapped mountains and endless evergreens. Same beautiful emptiness and remote ranches. Same Ray up there above it all. Even as some view the route as excess, Mr. Arnold's customers say that what he does, as one put it, is in keeping with "the very core of that remaining pioneer Western ethic that exists out here."

Many of those would-be pioneers have satellite dishes and Web sites. Some are caretakers who watch over a ranch until the wealthy owner brings the family in for vacation. Some run rustic lodges for hunters and fishermen. Some make a living catering to the floaters who loll down the river on rafts in the summer. One couple run a Christian retreat.

And there still are a few places like the Badley Ranch, a homespun, hydro-powered horse ranch that the Badley family has owned for four generations.

"Ray's my only contact in the wintertime at all," said Luke Badley, 29 and ready to chat during the few minutes each week when he sees outsiders.

Mr. Arnold sat on a porch with Luke and his father, Jack. He had already made six stops over the course of a few hours, each time coming to a jarring, clanging, rattling ka-thump on a short, inclined slope, and then unloading letters, bills, prescriptions and tractor parts. Customers also pay him by the pound to deliver groceries, supplies and perhaps a few bags of feed. He will take passengers, too, though the plane holds only four people.

His customers hug him and hand him bundles of lilac blossoms or fresh eggs to be given to the next stop down the line. One caretaker, Sue Anderson of Yellow Pine Bar, loaded him up with vegetable starts for the owners of the ranch, the DeBoer family of McCall, Idaho.

"There's a tremendous community among the people in this canyon," said Doug Tims, 62, who owns Campbell's Ferry Ranch. "He's the thread that ties it all together."

Although the postal agency says it will continue the mail service, it is not clear that it will still pay Arnold Aviation \$46,000 each year.

Mr. Arnold's former wife, Carol Arnold, who runs the Arnold Aviation office, in Cascade, Idaho, noted that in his letter to Mr. Minnick, the postmaster general said "this contract should continue in its present form."

But Mr. DeSarro said he believed that Mr. Potter had been referring to the regularity and quality of service, not to a specific financial arrangement. He said that most such contract routes paid on a per-pound basis and that only a few, including Mr. Arnold's and some somewhat comparable routes in rural Alaska, paid by the number of miles flown.

That potential revision could reduce the value of the contract to less than \$6,000, Ms. Arnold said. Arnold Aviation often flies several hundred miles round trip in a day of mail delivery.

At Whitewater Ranch last Wednesday, Cornelia Shotwell handed Mr. Arnold small paper plates of homemade cookies.

At the next stop, at Campbell's Ferry, Mr. Arnold recounted what he said were the many challenges of the

route that the post office does not understand: the days he gets weathered in and has to stay overnight at a ranch, the perils of bears and deer on runways, even the runways themselves, some rising at inclines of more than 20 degrees.

Mr. Arnold took out Mrs. Shotwell's cookies and offered them all around. "Fringe benefits," he said. "Don't tell the post office I get fringe benefits."

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---

Welcome to TimesPeople  
Get Started

TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NYTimes.com

4:07 PM

Recommen

The New York Times

U.S.

MORE SLIDE SHOWS

### Idaho Airmail

1 of 12



For 34 years, Ray Arnold has been pilot and mailman to the people on Idaho's Salmon River, an area of rugged roadless wilderness in the northern Rocky Mountains. Left, Mr. Arnold on a steep approach into Badley Ranch.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

Your vote can help a Shine a Light finalist win \$100,000 in grant and marketing support.

One of three businesses will receive **OPEN** **APPLY NOW**

Video by: OPEN Forum \*\*\*\*\*

shine a light money marketing innovation managing

Home | U.S. | Log In | Register Now

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company | Privacy Policy | Contact Us | Help | Work for Us | Site Map

The New York Times

U.S.

MORE SLIDE SHOWS ▾

### Idaho Airmail

2 of 12

Mr. Arnold's service costs the Postal Service \$46,000 a year to serve about 20 secluded addresses. When the service was looking to close a potential \$6.5 billion budget deficit, an auditor's eyes fell on Mr. Arnold's route.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times



RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

**100 Billion Reasons to Reform Health Care**



**American Hospital Association**

[Home](#) | [U.S.](#) | [Log In](#) | [Register Now](#)

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

Welcome to TimesPeople  
Get Started

TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NYTimes.com

4:12 PM

Recommen

The New York Times

U.S.

MORE SLIDE SHOWS

### Idaho Airmail

3 of 12



Margery Tabor helped Mr. Arnold unload the plane at Selway Lodge. Mr. Arnold brings letters, bills, prescriptions and tractor parts. Customers also pay him by the pound to deliver groceries, supplies and perhaps a few bags of feed. The threat of his closing brought the people of northern Idaho to action.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

Fixing Medical Liability  
Saves **\$100 Billion**



[Home](#) | [U.S.](#) | [Log In](#) | [Register Now](#)

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

Recommen

The New York Times

U.S.

MORE SLIDE SHOWS

### Idaho Airmail

4 of 12



SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE |

After receiving scores of calls, letters and e-mail messages, John E. Potter, the postmaster general, decided that Mr. Arnold's route, the last air route into a wilderness area in the continental United States, should best be left as is.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

**100 Billion Reasons**  
to Reform Health Care



**American Hospital  
Association**

[Home](#) | [U.S.](#) | [Log In](#) | [Register Now](#)

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

### Idaho Airmail

5 of 12



Even as some view the route as excess, Mr. Arnold's customers say that what he does, as one put it, strikes "at the very core of that remaining pioneer Western ethic that exists out here."

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

**#1 On Medicare Reliability**  
**Saves \$100 Billion**

American Hospital Association



Welcome to TimesPeople  
Get Started

TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NYTimes.com

4:16 PM

Recommen

The New York Times

U.S.

MORE SLIDE SHOWS

### Idaho Airmail

6 of 12



Gloria Mozingo loaded her motorcycle with deliveries from Mr. Arnold. While many of the people that Mr. Arnold serves have satellite dishes and Web sites, he is crucial to their lives.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

**Fixing Medical Liability  
Saves \$100 Billion**

[Home](#) | [U.S.](#) | [Log In](#) | [Register Now](#)

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

### Idaho Airmail

7 of 12



At Whitewater Ranch last Wednesday, Cornelia Shotwell handed Mr. Arnold small paper plates of homemade cookies. Mr. Arnold took out Mrs. Shotwell's cookies and offered them all around. "Fringe benefits," he said. "Don't tell the post office I get fringe benefits."

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

## 100 Billion Reasons to Reform Health Care



American Hospital Association

Welcome to TimesPeople  
Get Started

TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NYTimes.com

4:18 PM

Recommen

The New York Times

U.S.

MORE SLIDE SHOWS

### Idaho Airmail

8 of 12



Mrs. Shotwell looked at mail with her son Austin near the Whitewater landing strip. Most of the landing strips Mr. Arnold has to face are narrow and occasionally scattered with bears and deer. Some rise at inclines of more than 20 degrees. In the winter, Mr. Arnold sometimes gets weathered in and has to stay overnight at a ranch.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

**Fixing Medical Liability Saves \$100 Billion**

 An advertisement for a report titled 'Fixing Medical Liability Saves \$100 Billion'. The text is in blue and black. Below the text is a golden icon of a pair of scales of justice.

[Home](#) | [U.S.](#) | [Log In](#) | [Register Now](#)

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

Idaho Airmail

9 of 12



"Ray's my only contact in the wintertime at all," said Luke Badley, right, as he sat on the porch with his father, Jack, and Mr. Arnold, left. It was Mr. Arnold's sixth stop over the course of a few hours. By the end of the day, he usually covers several hundred miles.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

Fixing Medical Liability  
Saves **\$100 Billion**

Idaho Airmail

10 of 12



Mr. Arnold's customers hug him and hand him bundles of lilac blossoms or fresh eggs to be given to the next stop down the line. "There's a tremendous community among the people in this canyon," said Doug Tims, left, who owns Campbell's Ferry Ranch. "He's the thread that ties it all together."

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

Fixing Medical Liability  
Saves **\$100 Billion**



SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

Welcome to TimesPeople  
Get Started

TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NYTimes.com

4:21 PM

Recommen

The New York Times

U.S.

MORE SLIDE SHOWS

### Idaho Airmail

11 of 12



For now, Mr. Arnold will continue flying his same route. Same vast expanse of snow-capped mountains and endless evergreens. Same beautiful emptiness and remote ranches. Same Ray up there above it all.

Photo: Paul Hosefros for The New York Times

RELATED

Article: Idaho Courier Survives Postal Cost-Cutting

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND | TWITTER | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

**Fixing Medical Liability Saves \$100 Billion**



[Home](#) | [U.S.](#) | [Log In](#) | [Register Now](#)

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)