

Pilots...Not Profits

New Public Airstrips on the Horizon

by Mike Sidders

You're on short final. The runway isn't in sight yet, but from evaluating the approach at altitude, you know where it lies: lined up with the riffle on the second bend in the river. Full flaps, you nudge the throttle slightly to hold your altitude until the threshold comes into view. From here on, there is no go-around. The controls are soft and there is little margin for error. Almost simultaneously, the strip comes into view, the edge of the river slips by, and the mains touch down.

You're not the first one who has landed here; your well-worn copy of Galen Hanselman's *Fly Idaho!* is proof of that. Thanks in part to the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF), you won't be the last.

The RAF is a private foundation dedicated to preserving existing airstrips and actually creating *new* public-use recreational airstrips throughout the United States. Recognized by the IRS as a non-profit 501(c)(3) charitable organization, the RAF is using tax-deductible donations to acquire private land for the development of new airstrips.

Johnson Creek in Idaho and Spotted Bear in Montana are examples of recreational airstrips that most general aviation aircraft of moderate performance can operate in and out of safely. They offer good approaches with relatively long turf runways. Camping facilities, fishing and hiking opportunities, and peaceful relaxation are all to be found in abundance.

Open your latest issue of *Pilot Getaways* and you'll see that most pilots envision this type of simple, rustic, natural-surface destination where they can blend family recreation with their love of airplanes. This is the type of setting the RAF is looking for when considering locations for new airstrips.

Many pilots don't have high-performance aircraft or the experience to operate safely into some of the more remote airstrips, but they still want to tour the countryside in their own airplane.

To assist these pilots, and to provide a connection between the backcountry and surrounding communities, the RAF is attracting donors who wish to specifically target their charitable donations locally. These funds have recently been directed toward a campaign to construct pilot shelters at larger, paved airports that serve as gateways to the backcountry. Similar in concept to the rest stops along our interstate highway system, the first of these shelters is under construction at Gallatin Field (BZN) in Bozeman, Montana. It will offer pilots a place to pitch a tent on the grass near their airplane, relax in front of a campfire and even take a hot shower—all at no charge.

Preserving What We Have

RAF board president John McKenna worked closely with the Gallatin Airport Authority to get matching funds and a donated site for the shelter. "It'll be a great place to relax and off-load some gear so your airplane will perform better. Plus, if the weather closes in for a while, you've got a place to stay," McKenna said.

While Montana and Utah have been at the forefront of battles over the suitability of air access to public lands, Colorado, Arizona, and California have also hosted recent challenges to this access. Even in Idaho, where aviators previously considered their cherished airstrips congressionally protected, rule changes on aircraft access were narrowly averted by vigilant backcountry pilot groups.

The RAF hopes to become a central source of educational materials available to pilot organizations from around the country. These documents can be tailored to address specific applications when approaching local land management agencies regarding potential closures.

Board members of the RAF have already provided assistance to pilots in several Western states and are working closely with the BLM to protect six airstrips in Montana's Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument.

They have developed a beneficial working relationship with the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service by presenting factual data and making reasonable requests. In their presentations to land managers, the RAF has shown that aircraft create a minimal impact on public lands and offer access to remote areas regardless of physical limitations.



Camping at Mexican Mountain, Utah.

Promoting The Future

The RAF is depending on other pilots to help them identify potential real estate for the development of new airstrips. Oftentimes, we have friends or acquaintances who built their own airstrip and want to see their dream continue long after they are gone. These situations lend themselves perfectly to the tax deductions that are available to the donor.

Without the enabling work of the RAF, your recreational opportunities—whether they are cross-country or backcountry—will continue to diminish as airfields are closed or their use becomes restricted. Earning your pilot certificate wasn't easy. Creating new airstrips isn't easy, either. Nothing worthwhile ever is.

The foundation invites donations of any kind, including land suitable for airstrip development. Cash donations are always welcome and fully tax-deductible. The RAF offers tax and legal assistance for donors and the Board members receive no compensation. They love flying as much as the rest of us and they're here for us, the pilots...not profits. ■

The Recreational Aviation Foundation can be reached at 1711 W. College St., Bozeman, MT 59715. Call them at (406) 587-5166, or visit their website at www.recreationalaviationfoundation.org.

Planning on enjoying the backcountry of our Western states in the near future? Galen Hanselman's *Fly Idaho!* and *Fly The Big Sky!* are indispensable recreation guides. Order online at www.flyidaho.com or call toll-free (800) 934-9702. Galen is working on a new book for flying Utah to be released in the near future.

Active membership groups that are doing important work to keep the backcountry open to airplanes include the Recreational Airstrip Committee of Montana Pilots Association, www.montanapilots.org/backcountry; the Idaho Aviation Association, www.flyidaho.org; and the Utah Back Country Pilots, www.utahbackcountrypilots.org.