



AIRCRAFT OWNERS AND PILOTS ASSOCIATION

April 4, 2012

Mr. Steve Hoover
Attn: Alaska LRTP
4601 DTC Blvd, Suite 700
Denver, CO 80237

Re: Comments on the draft **Alaska Federal Lands Long Range Transportation Plan**

Dear Mr. Hoover:

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), representing more than 400,000 members nationwide, almost 5,000 of whom live in Alaska, offer the following comments on the Alaska Federal Lands Long Range Transportation Plan. We appreciate this collaborative effort to consider transportation needs across the agencies in a state where the federal agencies collectively manage 221 million acres, or just shy of 60% of the total lands in Alaska.

While the federal lands covered in this plan are distributed across the entire state, a common element shared by most is their large size (in comparison to units in other parts of the country) and the lack of traditional road transportation infrastructure not only within, but in many cases even near the boundaries of the parks, refuges, forests or other administrative units. Consequently, access by air is an important component for many of these lands, either for routine administrative functions, visitor access and emergency access during natural hazards or other situations where time is critical. In many cases, it is the only practical means of timely access. Knowing the location and condition of backcountry airports, airstrips or landing areas appears to be a need that all the agencies share. AOPA encourages taking a collaborative approach across the agencies to map these resources, and including their location and descriptions in the appropriate aviation databases in a consistent and useful manner.

The desire to partner is mentioned throughout the draft plan, and AOPA supports that concept. Some areas where there are opportunities for partnerships include:

Backcountry Airstrip Maintenance: In several western states, the aviation community works directly with agencies to do volunteer maintenance on backcountry airstrips. For example, the Montana Department of Transportation - Division of Aeronautics coordinates with pilots to do light maintenance on backcountry airstrips. In Alaska, Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 42 has partnered with the National Park Service to cut brush and do other maintenance on airstrips in Wrangell St. Elias National Park. AOPA is willing to help support similar activities across the state.

Airport Inventory: The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) is currently developing an Alaska Aviation System Plan. A component of this effort is to develop a common Geographic Information System (GIS) to contain information about airports. This infrastructure may be expanded to include backcountry airports, providing a single system to keep the airport information on state and federal lands.

Airport Management Expertise: Airports, even backcountry airstrips and landing areas, require technical knowledge that the typical resource agency may not contain in their skill set. While the landing strip, river channel or lake may be the most visible feature present on the surface, consideration of invisible surfaces leading to and away from the runway is critical to the safety of pilots and passengers using these facilities. Maintaining adequate buffers around them is another safety concern. Obtaining assistance from the FAA Airports Division on how to create an Airport Master Record, attending airport related training classes put on by the Alaska Airports Association, and information from other aviation groups are mechanisms available to obtain the expertise needed to address airport related issues.

Communication with the aviation community: As aviation related issues arise either with regard to a specific airport issue, or when developing general management plans, the *Alaska Aviation Coordination Council* provides a way to reach the statewide aviation industry and government agencies that deal with aviation issues. Their website contains contact information for the group: <http://sites.google.com/site/akaviationcoordination/>

Backcountry airports are a vital part of the Alaskan transportation network. Just as larger airports are sometimes grouped into categories based on the functions they serve (regional hubs versus community airports, for example), it may be helpful to consider that not all backcountry airports are equal or have identical needs. Some are well defined airstrips that were originally constructed for an industrial purpose such as mineral exploration, or to support a communication site, which were subsequently abandoned. Today, they serve as points of access for agency personnel, or back country users. They also may at times serve as an emergency landing field when mechanical problems develop, or unforecast weather makes it impossible for a pilot to proceed to his or her original destination. In other cases, totally unmodified areas (gravel bars, river channels, lakes, etc.) provide landing sites for aviation access. The needs of these different backcountry areas are quite different, and it may be helpful to classify them into different groupings when considering them in management plans. This too is an area in which it would be helpful if the concerned agencies worked collaboratively for a common approach, rather than having each agency deal with them in a unique fashion.

AOPA appreciates the comprehensive approach being taken by the agencies in developing the Alaska Federal Lands Long Range Transportation Plan. We are very glad to see that aviation is receiving recognition as a critical factor, and look forward to working with the agencies to better define the aviation component of these plans.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



Tom George
Alaska Regional Manager