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July 18, 2012

Attn. Saline Valley Management Plan  
Superintendent Sarah Craighead  
Death Valley National Park  
P.O. Box 579  
Death Valley, CA 92328

Dear Superintendent Craighead:

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) represents the general aviation interests of 400,000 members, more than two-thirds of the nation's pilots – including 44,490 of our members in the state of California. On behalf of our membership, AOPA is committed to ensuring the future viability and development of general aviation airports and their facilities as part of a national transportation system. One significant part of that national transportation system is public aeronautical access to our national parks. It is for that reason that we submit the following comments to the Saline Valley Warm Springs Management Plan/EIS scoping notice.

AOPA has long been an advocate for the landing facility in the Saline Valley known as Chicken Strip Airstrip. We wrote to your predecessor in 2003 and again in 2006 expressing our concern for the continued operation of Chicken Strip and the other airstrips within the Death Valley National Park. Now, as the Park gets ready to conduct a management plan study we write again to express our strong support for the continued use of Chicken Strip. As you are well aware the strip is useful both to the Park Service and to your customers who utilize the strip to access the Warm Springs area. Visitors who couldn't tolerate or would otherwise find inconvenient the several hours it takes to traverse the only access road are able to comfortably visit an area of ecological, cultural and historical significance. We would also point out that aircraft use of Chicken Strip is far less obtrusive than access via land vehicles over a very long roadway.

Chicken Strip is a model of cooperation between the recreational users and the Park Service via the memorandum of agreement with the Recreational Aviation Foundation to use RAF volunteers to maintain the strip to Park Service standards and guidelines. When the strip was temporarily closed last year, RAF volunteers assisted in taking care of flash flood damage and getting the strip reopened for use. AOPA is a strong supporter of RAF and other backcountry airstrip organizations and commends them for the efforts they make in helping to keep these airstrips open.

Superintendent Sarah Craighead

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Keeping Chicken Strip open gives the Park Service a way to rapidly respond to crises in that part of the Park, particularly when the road track is washed away. It can be used also by firefighting aircraft and aircraft engaged in emergency or rescue operations for lost or injured park visitors. Chicken Strip serves as an internal trailhead that provides for minimal disturbance to the local environment and there is a long history of use.

In conclusion, AOPA respectfully requests that the Park Service continue to keep Chicken Strip airstrip open for use by Park visitors and that the Management Plan reflect that and the Memorandum of Understanding between the Park and the RAF continue in the best tradition of a public-private partnership. Thank you for your consideration of our views on this important Park access issue. If we can be of further help, please contact us at 301-695-2200.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Collins', with a stylized arrow-like flourish extending to the left.

John L. Collins  
Manager  
Airport Policy