



## Division of Aeronautics and Aeronautics Advisory Board

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April 1, 2021

Mr. Bill Moad  
Chairman, Idaho Transportation Board

Chairman Moad and Members of the Idaho Transportation Board:

The Idaho Aeronautics Advisory Board, in coordination with the Aeronautics Division Administrator, recommends the Idaho Transportation Board approve the Division of Aeronautics to accept management of the Hoodoo Meadows Airstrip in Lemhi County, Idaho and to reestablish functional aircraft operational conditions. Title 21-106 of Idaho code allows the Idaho Transportation Department, with Idaho Transportation Board approval, to establish, operate and maintain state-owned airstrips. To implement that process, the Idaho Transportation Board Policy 4065 and Administrative Policy 5065 require the Aeronautics Advisory Board and Aeronautics Division Administrator to provide a written recommendation for acquiring an airstrip and to provide specific information for your consideration for approval or disapproval. This letter is intended to fill that purpose.

Hoodoo Meadows Airstrip is on United States Forest Service (USFS) property sitting south of Yellow Jacket Lake on the Salmon-Cobalt Ranger District of the Salmon-Challis National Forest 33 miles west-southwest of Salmon. The Forest Service managed the airstrip until the mid-1980s, at which time they reduced funding and allowed the runway to become overgrown with vegetation and trees. While the airfield is overgrown, it was never officially closed. Once overgrown, it was no longer suitable for aircraft operations. In evaluating the airstrip and considering whether or not to recommend the Division of Aeronautics accept management responsibilities at Hoodoo Meadows, we considered cost, safety, emergency preparedness, public opinion, benefit versus detriment, alternative plan and proximity to other airstrips. Below is our analysis in each of those areas.

### Cost:

We reviewed cost for reestablishing operations at Hoodoo Meadows from both short-term and long-term viewpoints. The short-term focus is on creating a safe flying environment that includes clearing trees and shrubbery that has overgrown the airfield, installing a windsock, building runway end identifiers and smoothing the runway surface. The plan would be to restore the runway to its original dimensions of 2,200 feet long and 150 feet wide. The Division of Aeronautics costs are detailed below.

Function	Material Cost
Windsock and Standard	\$1,000
Runway End Identifiers	\$500
Travel Expenses	\$1,000

The Division of Aeronautics can cover these expenses with current operations funding. In addition, the Idaho Aviation Association (IAA), the Recreation Aviation Foundation (RAF) and the Idaho Fish and Game pledged both funding and manpower for the initial clearing process.

Longer term, the IAA will use volunteers to maintain the airfield, which is a common practice at many state-managed airfields. The Division of Aeronautics estimates a requirement for Division personnel to visit the airfield approximately once every three years to evaluate approach and departure corridor tree heights and to drag, or smooth, the runway. The Division can accomplish this within the normal airfield maintenance processes.

**Safety:**

Safety is always the primary consideration. The runway and surrounding terrain allow for landings and departures in either direction with little to no terrain interference. Like most backcountry airfields, trees will require trimming to appropriate heights or removal, which the Division of Aeronautics will do in coordination with the USFS.

The most significant safety challenge is the airfield elevation. At 8,200', Hoodoo Meadows would be the highest elevation airfield under Division of Aeronautics management. The elevation, combined with summer heat, creates a density altitude challenge for pilots as aircraft performance declines with higher density altitudes. Density altitude is a topic addressed in all backcountry pilot training as well as Division of Aeronautics Safety programs. While this is a challenge, it applies to all backcountry, summer flight operations.

Despite the challenges, there is also a positive aspect. Hoodoo Meadows would provide an emergency landing site that currently does not exist. Many flights to the backcountry originate and terminate from Salmon with outfitters routinely transporting sportsman to various locations in the Wilderness Area and beyond. There are very few suitable locations for emergency landing purposes in that area, and as such, Hoodoo Meadows would provide additional safety for those operations.

**Emergency Preparedness:**

Emergency preparedness specifically addresses the airfields relation to the State Civil Disaster Plan. Hoodoo Meadows would have no role in that plan. It may however, provide a limited option for firefighting operations.

**Public Opinion:**

The ITD Office of Communications administered the public comment process from March 15 through March 29, 2021 through a webpage specifically designed for inputs on Hoodoo Meadows. Comment options included email, phone or written mail for input. Overall, the department received a large number of comments both supporting and opposing the airfield restoration. More specifically, ITD received 184 comments in support, to include the Idaho Fish and Game highlighting the recreational advantage and further committing to aid in the required maintenance. The most prevalent comments include support of increased access to the Idaho backcountry, the Frank Church Wilderness Area in particular, and as an emergency landing airfield. Of the supporting comments, 112 are Idaho residents, 26 are from out of state and 49 are unknown.

Opposition came in various forms. There were five emails opposing and no phone or verbal comments with all five inputs coming from Idaho residents. Comments focused on preserving the wilderness and stating there are already enough existing backcountry airstrips. In addition, some further challenged the "access" argument by stating many pilots fly in the backcountry for "thrill seeking" and not to access Idaho's backcountry, which is counter to the rationale for airstrip existence and intent.

Finally, Wilderness Watch, a national nonprofit wilderness conservation organization, provided a letter to the USFS and ITD opposing the action and challenging the categorical exclusion stating the action may impact water, Cutthroat activity and other wildlife. Wilderness Watch also established a method for members to provide more generic inputs with over 1,000 emails opposing the action in order to maintain the wilderness aspects of the region and recommending permanent closure of the airstrip. Of the 1,000 email, 22 submissions were from Idahoans.

**Benefit versus Detriment:**

The greatest benefit to opening Hoodoo Meadows is access to the Wilderness Area as well as areas around Sugar Loaf Rock and Yellow Jacket Lake. A primary point of interest for the Idaho Fish and Game is hunter dispersion. Hunting is a common use for backcountry airfields with it being common for one airfield to have more than 20 hunters at any given time. With limited access in the region, Hoodoo Meadows Airfield would allow hunters additional access and provide better hunter dispersion in the region. In addition, as the USFS describes, in their Hoodoo Meadows Airstrip Maintenance Project Categorical Exclusion, (page 2, Purpose and Need) Hoodoo Meadows would "meet public demand for access to traditional recreational opportunities in the area, which has historically been a popular destination for big game hunting, alpine lake fishing, and wildlife viewing activities."

While we believe it will be minimal, there are potential detrimental impacts. Landing and departing aircraft will create additional noise, however, the Idaho Fish and Game, as documented by the USFS in their categorical exclusion (Table 7, page 21) estimates 50-70 takeoffs and landings annually and stating "effects to solitude could be roughly 18 hours a year in 15-minute increments. The categorical exclusion provides more details on potential detriments, but ultimately met criteria for environmental categorical exclusion requirements.

**Alternative Plans:**

As various agencies engaged on evaluating reestablishing operations at Hoodoo Meadows, they discussed several options for airfield management. Those options included management by the USFS, Idaho Fish and Game and the Division of Aeronautics. While the USFS does maintain backcountry airstrips in Idaho, limited funding led to the lack of maintenance over the last 25-30 years at Hoodoo Meadows. Likewise, the Idaho Fish and Game maintains several backcountry airfields, but has limited airfield maintenance capabilities. The Division of Aeronautics is in the best position to accept management responsibilities having the necessary expertise and resources, when aided by the IAA, RAF and Fish and Game.

**Proximity to Other Airstrips:**

Hoodoo Meadows Airstrip would have no impact to other airfields or aircraft operations. The airstrip sits approximately 33 miles west-southwest of Salmon, ten miles from Bernard Airstrip and the Flying B Ranch, and 12 miles from Soldier Bar Airstrip. While Hoodoo Meadows will not impact other airstrips, it does provide an emergency landing option for aircraft operating from Salmon to locations such as Bernard, Soldier Bar and many other airstrips.

**Recommendation**

The Division of Aeronautics and numerous other agencies, both public and private, have evaluated reestablishing airfield operations at Hoodoo Meadows, and we believe developed a valid, unified management plan for the future. This airfield will provide recreationists additional access to Idaho's backcountry and Wilderness Area as well as disperse hunters throughout the area. As a result, we recommend the Idaho Transportation Board approve the Division of Aeronautics to accept management responsibility for Hoodoo Meadows Airstrip and allow the Division, in coordination with the IAA, RAF and Fish and Game to reestablish a functional airfield for all to enjoy.



Mark H. Sweeney  
Chairman  
Idaho Aeronautics Advisory Board



Jeffrey L. Marker  
Administrator  
Division of Aeronautics