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Lawsuit challenges unlawful expansion of aircraft landing areas in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness

Unlawful airplane landing areas compromise Wilderness character, solitude and disturb wildlife in River of No Return Wilderness

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BOISE, IDAHO—Today, Wilderness Watch, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Friends of the Bitterroot, and Friends of the Clearwater filed a [lawsuit](#) against the Payette National Forest in central Idaho. The groups are challenging the Forest Service’s unlawful decisions to establish and maintain four locations in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness for aircraft landings and to permit hobby pilots to use these sites for motorized recreation. The four plaintiffs are represented by Advocates for the West.

At more than 2.3 million acres, the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness is the largest contiguous federally managed Wilderness in the United States outside of Alaska, providing important habitat for a wide variety of native wildlife species susceptible to disruption by aircraft flying low over—and landing within—the Wilderness. The Central Idaho Wilderness Act, which designated the River of No Return Wilderness in 1980, grandfathered a select few airstrips that were already in public use for wilderness access to remote areas.

Yet, four locations now popularized by hobby airplane pilots were not among the lawful, grandfathered locations. These four unlawful landing sites occur in the Big Creek drainage, a popular area for hikers, backpackers, and river rafters. The Forest Service’s own documents show the agency recognized back in 1980 that these former dirt airstrips, once used to reach private property, were abandoned, unmaintained, and not subject to public access. Thus, in 1982, the agency and the state of Idaho agreed that these four sites in the River of No Return Wilderness should revert back to their natural state. Three lawful public-access airstrips on National Forest land and one on state land already exist within the Big Creek watershed, over an area only about 30 miles from east to west.

The Forest Service has long bowed to pressure from aviators pushing the agency to open the Big Creek Four to unlimited use by recreational pilots. Years ago, rather than state clearly its determination that these sites were closed to all landings, the agency labeled them “emergency use only,” a phrase that pilots have long chosen to ignore, instead treating the sites as open for public use.

As the complaint filed today explains, “[t]he Forest Service has never documented or substantiated its need to make these four locations available for emergency landings. Each of the Big Creek Four landing areas sits within several miles of an open public or private airstrip.” The agency lacks any documentation of true emergency landings at the Big Creek Four over the past 40 years, the complaint alleges. Instead, these spots have “more reliably served to *create* emergencies as pilots wrecked while attempting to land at these locations for fun.”

The area’s wilderness quality continues to suffer from the ongoing and increasing noise and intrusion, with the illicit landing areas being used for multi-airplane rendezvous, practice “touch and go” landings, airstrip “bagging” in which recreational pilots see how many landings at different locations they can rack up, and even overnight airplane camping. The Forest Service has documented that a person in the Big Creek area—and the wildlife there—can often encounter up to 30 low-flying airplanes in a single day.

“The Wilderness Act makes clear that the Forest Service must protect the Wilderness character of the River of No Return, and it makes particularly clear that aircraft landings and other motorized activity are allowed only under narrowly defined conditions,” said George Nickas, Wilderness Watch executive director. “The Big Creek Four airstrips were not in regular use at the time of Wilderness designation in 1980, and they have never been lawful airstrips open to any public use. Establishing four more landing strips in the Big Creek drainage just chokes this spectacular area with incessant airplane traffic.”

For years, the agency has been turning a blind eye to the growing popularity of illegal landings. In response to recent pressure, the Forest Service changed its official tune to further facilitate the aircraft landings. A 2018 directive from the Regional Forester dictated a new policy of allowing the public to land at the Big Creek Four even in non-emergency situations. It also called for the preparation of formal maintenance plans in consultation with Idaho, which the agency completed in 2022. Last summer, Forest Service staff went out to one of the Big Creek Four locations and began cutting down large trees to clear a better pathway for aircraft to land. Similar development is planned for the future.

“That’s why we’re taking the Forest Service to court. Opening these locations to public aircraft landings has no basis in the law, and it degrades the wilderness in direct contravention of the Forest Service’s wilderness protection mandate,” explained Dana Johnson, Wilderness Watch’s policy director based in Moscow, Idaho. “Our lawsuit will show how the Forest Service has ignored the facts in its record, acted contrary to the Wilderness Act and the Central Idaho Wilderness Act, and capitulated to recreational flying demand without disclosing and analyzing the environmental impact it would cause.”

“The Forest Service’s unlawful actions are trammeling upon the legacy of former United States Sen. Frank Church and other conservation visionaries,” said Laurie Rule, senior attorney at Boise-based Advocates for the West. “Catering to an escalating number of recreational pilots wanting to make Wilderness their motorized playground flies in the face of the agency’s duty under the law to manage wild places like the River of No Return Wilderness in their natural state.”

“These four illegal and unnecessary airstrips in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness have become an increasing source of noise pollution and disruption for highly-sensitive wildlife, and under the Central Idaho Wilderness Act of 1980 should have been completely closed and allowed to return to a wild state over 40 years ago,” said Sara Husby, Executive Director of Great Old Broads for Wilderness. “The fact that the U.S. Forest Service has not only continued to allow private pilots to use these illegal airstrips, but has been clearing trees and began working with the State of Idaho on formal maintenance plans to make them easier for pilots to use, is an outrageous violation of both federal statute and the agency’s own wilderness protection mandates.”

"Disruption of silence and solitude in this premier Wilderness by airplane landings damages wilderness character across a broad swath, not just at the landing strip," said Larry Campbell with Friends of the Bitterroot. "The sudden, sporadic nature of it is unexpected and startling for people visiting the Wilderness by traditional means and, no doubt, for resident wildlife."

“In the context of Idaho State’s grotesque war on wolves, secure wilderness could not be more important.” said Paul Busch of Moscow, Idaho-based Friends of the Clearwater. “Central Idaho is called the ‘Big Wild’ due to its sheer size and wild character, not because of ample access to airstrips. The U.S. Forest Service should defend that character and follow the law.”

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