

Decision Notice
& Finding of No Significant Impact
Lincoln Airport Special Use Permit

USDA Forest Service
Lincoln Ranger District, Helena National Forest
Lewis & Clark County, State
Northeast 1/4 Section 19 T14N R8W

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The Montana Department of Transportation submitted a special use application on July 26, 2004 to the U.S. Forest Service, Helena National Forest, to consider issuing a permit to the Montana Department of Transportation for the authorized use of approximately 40 acres of National Forest land for the operation of the Lincoln Airport. The permit would provide the Montana Department of Transportation the authorized use of National Forest land required for construction of improvements at Lincoln Airport needed to bring the facility into compliance with current FAA standards and allow for the continued operation of the airport facility at the existing location. A draft Environmental Assessment for the proposed improvements at Lincoln Airport was advertised for public review and comment in May of 2004. Public comments were accepted through July 1, 2004. Following the public comment period, the Final Environmental Assessment was prepared. There were no negative comments received pertaining to environmental consequences during the public comment period. The Federal Aviation Administration signed and issued the FONSI on July 2, 2004.

The proposed action is needed to ensure the continued and future operation of the Lincoln Airport at its current location. The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Lincoln Airport Special Use Permit documents the analysis of this one (1) alternative to meet this need and compares it to the "no-action" alternative.

Decision

Based upon my review of the "proposed-action" alternative and its associated impacts, I have decided to implement the proposed action and authorize the issuance of a Special Use Permit for the Lincoln Airport for a term period of 30 years.

When compared to the "no-action" alternative this alternative will allow for the operation of Lincoln Airport at the existing location for a minimum of 30 years and can be implemented without any adverse impact to the environment in the area. The proposed alternative meets the requirements under National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the Proposed Action, a No Action Alternative was considered in the EA for authorizing a Special Use Permit for the Lincoln airport.

No other action alternatives were considered under this EA.

Public Involvement

Extensive public involvement was encouraged throughout the airport master planning effort and during the preparation of the July 2004 EA for the airport improvements. Details of this public involvement process are provided in this EA (see EA pages 3-7).

Public involvement for this EA included publication of the Notice of Availability of the EA in the Helena Independent Record and the Blackfoot Valley Dispatch on March 17, 2005. The EA and supporting documentation were made available for review and comment at locations in Great Falls, Helena, and Lincoln for a period of 30 calendar days. The public comment period began on March 17, 2005 and ended on April 16, 2005. One public meeting was held during this period on March 24, 2005 at 7:00 P.M. Three (3) members of the public, two (2) representatives of the USFS, and two (2) representatives of Stelling Engineers, Inc. were in attendance. During the thirty (30) day public comment period including the public meeting, one comment was received regarding the EA.

The interdisciplinary team and decision maker have reviewed the comment and determined that it does not identify any new issues regarding the effects of the proposed action from those presented in the EA. A copy of the comment and response are attached as Appendix A to this Decision Notice/FONSI.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that the proposed action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. Impacts associated with the project are discussed in the Environmental Consequences section of the EA. These impacts are within the range of those identified in the FP. The effects of the decision to be made are not significant in the short- and long-term. The analysis clearly shows that the beneficial effects will not occur at the expense of other resources (see EA, Environmental Consequences section and July 2004 EA).
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety. There will be no significant change in the current use of the majority of the land under consideration. 25.57 acres of National Forest land has been used for the Lincoln Airport since 1964. The additional 14 acres that will be added under the new permit lie on the fringe of the existing airport. (see EA pages 13-14). Pavement conditions will eventually deteriorate to a point that the airport can no longer be used and the facility would be closed. The intended use of the National Forest land being considered for authorized use by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) for the operation of the Lincoln Airport does not conflict with or violate any of the management goals established for this Administrative A-1 Site as defined in the Helena National Forest Plan. In addition, Forest Plan Forest-wide standards for Land Uses state that: The Forest will "Enhance resource management by working with other agencies and landowners to develop and achieve

common resource objectives” and “Adjacent private lands will not preclude multiple use management of lands administered by the Forest Service. But management of Forest Service land will be modified where appropriate and necessary to complement land uses on adjacent non-Federal property”. (Helena National Forest Plan, Items 2 and 6, Page II/29).

3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. The majority of the National Forest land that has been used for the airport is clear of trees. In addition, some of the National Forest land adjacent to the airport has been commercially thinned of trees to improve forest health conditions and to reduce fire risk. Additional trees will be removed under the project for the proposed improvements at the airport and to improve the safety at the airport for aviation (see EA pages 21-23).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (see EA pages 17-19). The public involvement throughout the process has been well supported with only one negative letter of concern.
5. Scoping did not identify highly uncertain or unknown risks. The anticipated effects, as displayed in the Environmental Consequences chapter of the EA, on the human environment are not highly uncertain nor involve unique or unknown risks. The specific, technical analyses conducted for determinations of the impacts are supportable with use of accepted techniques (modeling), reliable data, and professional judgment. The evidence of this conclusion are analyzed and displayed in Environmental Consequences chapter of the EA.
6. This project is not setting a precedent for future actions with significant effects. The existing use and additional areas are compatible with the FP and with the capabilities of the land (EA, Environmental Consequences and Appendix D and Helena National Forest Plan, Items 2 and 6, Page II/29).
7. The Environmental Consequences section of this EA, the Environmental Consequences of the July 2004 EA and the Biological Evaluation, Biological Assessment disclosed cumulative impacts and I find that cumulative impacts are not considered to be significant.
8. There were no significant cultural sites found in the area or recorded by SHPO (see EA pages 22-23) on National Forest lands and therefore, the action will have no significant adverse effect on listed or the potential listing of the National Register of Historic Places. The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, because there were no significant scientific, cultural, or historical sites found in the area (see EA pages 22-23).
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because, for most of these species, habitat in the immediate vicinity of the airport is limited. For bald eagle and grizzly bear specific coordination measures were developed in the Biological Assessment to minimize potential impacts. (see EA pages 24-25 and

BA pages 3-11). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was informally consulted with and we received concurrence with agency findings in a letter dated February 4, 2005. In this letter, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that formal consultation was not required for the project. A summary of the conclusions reached on endangered and threatened species are included in the EA on pages 24 and 25. A copy of the Environmental Assessment, Biological Evaluation, Biological Assessment, and the letter from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is included in the project file at the Lincoln Ranger Station.

10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (Chapter 3, Environmental Consequences). The action is consistent with the Helena NF LRMP (Helena National Forest Plan, Items 2 and 6, Page II/29). The action will not adversely affect any rare or sensitive plant species. The Biological Resources Report (BRR), December 2004 determined that there were no known rare or sensitive plant species occurring within a five-mile radius of the project (ref. Section 3.1.4 of the BRR). The BRR is included in the project file at the Lincoln Ranger Station.

Based upon the review of the test for significance and the environmental analyses conducted, I have determined that the actions analyzed for the Lincoln Airport Special Use Permit is not a major federal action. In addition, the implementation of this project will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Accordingly, I have determined that an environmental impact statement need not be prepared for this project.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to authorize the use of National Forest land is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long term goals and objectives. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for Management Area A-1 (Forest Plan, Helena National Forest, Page 3-4).

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer at: Appeal Deciding Officer, Jane Kollmeyer, Acting Forest Supervisor, Helena National Forest, 2880 Skyway Drive, Helena MT 59602, fax (406) 449-5436.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 8:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to appeals-northern-helena@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the Helena Independent Record, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the Helena Independent Record, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who submitted substantive comments during the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact Mandy Alvino, Natural Resource Specialist, USDA Forest Service, Lincoln Ranger District, 1560 Highway 200, Lincoln, Montana.


AMBERDAWN KAMPS
District Ranger

4/27/15
Date

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Lincoln Ranger District

Appendix A

Comment Letter and Forest Service Response

During the thirty (30) day public comment period including the public meeting, one (1) comment was received. The comment was submitted in the required format specified under 36 CFR 215 and a determination was made that the comment met the requirements for "substantive". The comment letter and the Forest Service response letter are displayed below.

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To: Ms. Amber Kamps
District Ranger Lincoln Ranger District.
Helena National Forest.

Ms. Kamps.

The following is my comments pertaining to the environmental assessment for the Lincoln airport special use permit under 36 CFR 215.

I am very much against the expansion of the existing permit.

The lands involved in this project are National Forest lands that were purchased for and designated under the present Helena National Forest plan to be used for the administration of the Lincoln Ranger District. If this project is approved it will forever dedicate these lands to the Lincoln airport. The airport is not directly associated with the administration of National Forest lands.

The Lincoln Ranger Station is the only district on the Helena National Forest that is located in a Forested setting. It has always attracted visitor with its beautiful stand of ponderosa pine. These stands of large ponderosa pines were once present though out the valley are all but gone. The administration site at the Lincoln Ranger station is one of the few left. With this expansion of the airport along with the clearing along highway 200 hundred for the power line will forever change the historical landscape of the Lincoln Ranger District. The lost of pasture for administration of Forest Service stock will add to the need and cost of pasture. This project would also lessen future options for administration possibilities, and to the present assess to the Blackfoot River.

Thank you, for this opportunity to comment



Jerry K. Burns

PO box 116 Lincoln Montana 59639

File Code: 2300

Date: April 27, 2005

Dear Mr. Burns,

Thank you for your comment on the Environmental Assessment for the Lincoln Airport Special Use Permit. You were the only formal commentor for this project and the only commentor throughout the discussion over the last several years with negative input regarding environmental consequences of the airport improvements project on National Forest lands.

I have reviewed your comments in detail and have considered them in my decision. The following is my response to your comments and how they were used in my decision.

As you are aware, since 1964 the Lincoln Airport has been operating on 25.57 acres of National Forest land under authorized use. The total area of land being considered for the new permit is approximately 40 acres, an additional 14.5 acres. The additional acreage under consideration on this project would increase the total amount of land under authorized use to approximately 27 percent of the total administrative site, an increase of approximately 10 percent. One-hundred ten (110) acres of this administrative site or 73 percent is not associated with the special use activity.

I believe the Lincoln airport is directly associated with the administration of National Forest lands for reasons I will expand on later in this letter. The existing Lincoln airport was in place when the Helena Forest Plan was developed and the A-1 management area designation was assigned to this site in 1986. The airport use and the Special Use permit were not deemed to be in conflict with the management area designation and direction at that time or some specific language would have been included in the Forest Plan to address the conflict. It is my conclusion the intended use of the National Forest land being considered for authorized use by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) for the operation of the Lincoln Airport does not conflict with or violate any of the management goals established for this Administrative A-1 Site as defined in the Helena National Forest Plan. In addition, Forest Plan Forest-wide standards for Land Uses state that: The Forest will "Enhance resource management by working with other agencies and landowners to develop and achieve common resource objectives" and "Adjacent private lands will not preclude multiple use management of lands administered by the Forest Service. But management of Forest Service land will be modified where appropriate and necessary to complement land uses on adjacent non-Federal property". (Helena National Forest Plan, Items 2 and 6, Page II/29)

I am quite proud to be managing a District compound that is located in such a forested setting. The Lincoln Ranger District compound will continue to be a forested setting with large mature Ponderosa Pine trees even after the activity which would be authorized under the special use permit and the powerline work along Highway 200. MDT has estimated approximately 123 large trees (greater than 18" diameter) will be removed for FAA safety reasons from National Forest Land under the project. The majority of these trees are located adjacent to the airport boundary on the north side of the existing runway. The tree removal associated with this permit will not

detract from the visual quality of the area from Highway 200 or the main office building. The tree removal for the powerline is outside the scope of this project.

The tree removal will also not cut every large diameter ponderosa pine on the administrative site, the majority of these trees will remain. The authorization of this permit will change the way the compound looks, however for the reasons listed above I disagree that it will "forever change the historical landscape". The tree clearing proposed under the project is consistent with management practices for A-1 sites and is consistent with past need for tree clearing in the immediate vicinity of the airport. Additionally, specific mitigation measures to minimize the impacts associated with tree clearing on the project have been coordinated with the District Fisheries Biologist, Wildlife Biologist, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Special requirements have been included in the construction contract to minimize impacts to the areas immediately adjacent to the Blackfoot River.

The administrative site provides secondary pasture area for the Lincoln Ranger District pack stock. The area under authorized use by the MDT under this Special Use permit would result in a net loss of 14.5 acres for pasture, since the previously authorized 25.5 acres has not been available for pasture. District personnel keep pack stock in Lincoln for approximately six months each year. Regardless of this loss of 14.5 acres, we will still require additional pasture lands that include Indian Meadows Guard Station, Baldy, and an additional pasture which has historically been under lease for primary pasture (Spauls). The three pasture sites are sufficient for the needs of grazing the pack stock and the loss of forage on 14.5 acres of secondary pasture will not impact the District stock program. With the acquisition of the Nature Conservancy lands, District personnel are looking at these lands for potential pasture opportunities. It is my intention to secure these potential pasture areas under the A-1 management area and to initiate NEPA to change the management area direction for Baldy as well.

After further investigation on the access to the Blackfoot River, I have determined there will be little change as a result of this permit issuance. The previous Special Use Permit allows "nonexclusive use and public access" to the permitted land (item 18 of the Special Use Permit). This provision will remain in the new Special Use Permit. The only change will be the ease of access. Currently, the land permitted to MDT for the airport is partitioned by a four-wire farm fence. Access to and through the permitted land can essentially be anywhere along the fence line (ie. through the fence). After the project is completed, a new 8-foot wildlife fence will be constructed around the airport. This will restrict access to the airport and permitted land through six (6) new gates, which will be open to the public. Another access corridor has historically been through a shared easement across airport property at the west end of the runway. The Montana Department of Transportation recently purchased two tracts of land at this end of the airport from the individual who was record holder of the easement. As a result of this land purchase, all right, title, and interest in the easement was conveyed to MDT.

As with any decision, there are trade-offs with any potential impacts both environmental and social. I have worked closely with the interdisciplinary team and understand these trade-offs, including the issues that you have raised. The proposed action has a finding of no significant impacts. Therefore, my decision has largely been based on what is the best use of this land for the public good. This is in recognition that this land is identified as an administrative site, yet still considered public land. My decision to authorize this permit is based on the following:

- Without the authorization of this permit, the airport cannot be upgraded to FAA standards and will not be eligible for Federal funding. Pavement conditions will eventually deteriorate to a point that the airport can no longer be used and the facility would be closed. The improvements are not to upgrade this facility to accommodate more or larger aircraft, but to be able to use the site for current activity.
- The airport design improvements will allow for a greater spatial separation of fixed wing use and helicopter use. This design element is an issue of particular interest to the Forest Service related to safe helicopter operations supporting fire suppression and other resource activities.
- It is critical to provide a site that is in compliance with FAA standards and safety regulations for the current use. As a public officer, I feel it would be irresponsible to not authorize a permit to allow for the use of the airport that includes the necessary improvements. This is due to the needs of the community, particularly for emergencies such as air ambulance service and fire fighting.
- The USFS is the dominant user of the airport for firefighting purposes in the summer months. I am not willing to accept the risk or the liability of not having an airport to standard and knowingly allowing the use of it in its current condition. The improvements and permit authorization are critical to the safety of firefighters and pilots as well as being responsive to fire suppression. This is especially the case when we have communities at risk as we did with the Lincoln Complex fires in 2003.

I feel my decision to allow for the improvements to the airport on National Forest land and approve the special use permit contribute to the Helena National Forest's ability to "care for the land and serve the people", which is the mission of the U.S. Forest Service. Most importantly, this decision is necessary to accomplish this mission safely.

Thank you for taking the time to comment on this project Jerry. I also appreciate that we sat down and visited about your concerns and the rationale for this decision in a respectful manner. Your letter and this response will be included as part of the EA and FONSI document as well as the project record. Please also refer to the EA that provides a discussion on the issues you raise in more detail.

Sincerely,

/s/ AmberDawn Kamps

AMBERDAWN KAMPS
District Ranger