

Runway completed in Little Belt Mountains

By **KARL PUCKETT** • Tribune Staff Writer •
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Recreational pilots have access to the Little Belt Mountains of the Lewis and Clark National Forest for the first time via a new public grass runway 15 miles southwest of Utica.

Work began in 2009 on the 4,000-foot-long, 50-foot-wide runway across a meadow known as Russian Flat near the south fork of the Judith River, about 100 miles southeast of Great Falls.

On Aug. 21 and Aug. 22, about 40 volunteer pilots, families and guests put the finishing touches on the landing strip, after which it was opened to the public, said Ranger Ron Wiseman of the Judith District.

Workers and guests landed about 15 to 18 planes that weekend, but Wiseman said he doesn't expect heavy use on a regular basis.

"The pilots said this will probably be the one and only time you'll see this many planes up there," he said.

Carmine Mowbray, a spokeswoman for the Recreational Aviation Foundation, said the airstrip legitimizes access to the public forest by air. The runway is located near a campground and vault toilet.

"The engine shuts off, and then you become a hiker," Mowbray said.

A formal dedication is planned for 2011.

The Recreational Aviation Foundation contributed \$40,000 to the project, and the Montana Pilots Association contributed volunteers to build the airstrip. Central Cos. in Lewistown donated labor and equipment.

"The RAF has really hit the nail on the head getting the world to recognize that aviation is part of recreation," MPA President Wade Cebulski said.

RAF officials previously said the Russian Flat airstrip is the first to be constructed in a U.S. national forest in 40 years.

The Russian Flat area is leased to Don and Marilyn Derks for cattle grazing, and that won't change now that the runway has been opened for business, according to the Forest Service.

Wiseman said pilots got involved with the forest's travel planning process a few years ago, seeking additional backcountry airstrips, just as an ATV or hiking group would seek additional trails. The runway was added to the travel plan, which was approved by forest officials in 2007.

"It's just responding to another user group," Wiseman said.

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