

# New group aims to maintain back country access

A NEW AVIATION group, the Recreational Backcountry Pilots Association (RBPA) was formed late last year to engage with the Department of Conservation (DOC) on its policies affecting back country flying.

RBPA chairman Nigel Griffith says that this has meant meeting with the Minister of Conservation and senior DOC staff to sort out the problems of recreational fixed wing aircraft access to public conservation lands. Considerable progress has been made in building an understanding with DOC of the issues affecting recreational pilots wishing to use the DOC Estate. A number of matters have been, or are in the process of being, resolved.

The key negotiators for the group are Nigel Griffith, Mike Thomas and Bill Chisholm of Chisholm Associates, Omarama. A great deal of work is being done by all the committee members, who are prepared to travel considerable distances to attend the various meetings.

"We have identified significant issues with DOC's planning instruments such as the Draft Molesworth Management Plan and Draft Canterbury/Otago/Southland Aircraft Access Guidelines," says Nigel Griffith. "These planning documents seek to severely restrict recreational aviation access to DOC land."

Until now, DOC's planning processes have proceeded without much recognition of recreational aviators, and submissions from aviators have largely been ignored.

"Bit by bit, access has become more restricted," Nigel explains. "The RBPA has been specifically formed to right these wrongs by making submissions and advocating on behalf of recreational fixed wing aircraft pilots, alongside groups such as AOPA, SAA and others."

The Draft Molesworth Management Plan proposed to prohibit all recreational flying access, while allowing for commercial flying and flying for farming purposes. The RBPA submitted that this was contrary to the stated intent of the Conservation Act and the Cabinet decision on Molesworth, as well as being contrary to natural justice. The final plan is due out later this year.

The Draft Canterbury/Otago/Southland Aircraft Access Guidelines go further in proposing that airspace be restricted above most areas of the DOC estate. The RBPA has made submissions to these documents, along with submissions from the SAA, AOPA, Aviation Federation and many individuals, stating that any reasons to restrict recreational aircraft access need



to be well founded, rather than blanket restrictions for unstated reasons.

"Recreational flying is a bona fide recreational pursuit which should be fostered in accordance with the stated purpose of the Conservation Act, and should not be connected to commercial aircraft access which has a wholly different purpose," Nigel states.

Some of the other issues under discussion include:

- DOC's insurance requirements for landing on DOC land contain onerous and unnecessary insurance requirements. DOC is reviewing this.

- AIRCARE, which has been widely discredited but is still a requirement by DOC, is being reviewed. DOC advises that its focus is on noise abatement rather than other matters such as safety.

- DOC is reviewing its policy on landing on the marginal strip and river beds and seems prepared to take a practical approach to managing this.

- DOC is also prepared to consider allocating some landings on airstrips within national parks for recreational use.

- DOC still wishes to retain the concept of "natural quiet". This concept seems poorly defined and is often

used as an argument against aircraft landings within the DOC estate.

"This last one will be an ongoing sticking point between aviators and DOC," says Nigel. "However, as aviators we need to be increasingly aware of the adverse perception there is about aircraft noise and do our best to mitigate this by operating in a considerate way."

He summarises the situation by saying the RBPA is very active, continuing to meet with senior DOC staff, attending meetings with non-government organisations — including trampers, fishers, shooters, conservation groups, Forest and Bird, 4WD owners, jet boaters and many others — and working with the Minister of Conservation to try to sort out DOC's recreational aircraft policy.

The RBPA is committed to promoting relationships with other users and DOC, which should build understanding between all the various recreational groups, and assisting DOC in forming robust planning documents which are consistent with the stated purpose of the Conservation Act which requires the department to foster recreational activity. 

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