

Uncertainty over Banff and Jasper airstrips resolved

By Kevin Psutka, COPA President and CEO

Long awaited amendments to the National Parks Aircraft Access Regulations were Gazetted (came into law) on February 13, meaning Banff and Jasper continue to be available for emergency/diversionary use and Jasper is now available for non-commercial recreational use.

This is the end of a very long process which began in 1987 when Parks decided to delist the airstrips. The process accelerated after the Aircraft Access Regulations were amended in 1997 and charges were subsequently filed against area pilots for flying into Banff.

COPA was extensively involved (to put it mildly) in defending the pilots and advocating for and then participating in the very long Comprehensive Environmental Assessment Process that eventually led to a decision by the Parks Minister to reinstate them in the regulations.

Notwithstanding his decision and direction, additional advocating was required to ensure that the Minister's orders were carried out.

Here are COPA Chair reports (English and French) by former chairman Bob Kirkby summarizing the issues, the process and progress toward our goals.

March 2009:

www.copanational.org/ChairMar09.cfm

www.copanational.org/ChairMar09Fr.cfm

August 2010:

www.copanational.org/ChairAug10En.cfm

www.copanational.org/ChairAug10Fr.cfm

December 2011:

www.copanational.org/ChairDec11En.cfm

www.copanational.org/ChairDec11Fr.cfm

The Gazette announcement

(starting on page 321 www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p2/2013/2013-02-13/pdf/g2-14704.pdf) confirms that the airstrips have been relisted and it details what is permitted at each airstrip.

Banff airstrip continues to be available for emergencies and diversions, as defined in the announcement, and pilots will need to contact the Park Superintendent for permission to leave either Banff or Jasper after landing there for an emergency or diversion.

Reinstating the airstrips in the regulations ensures that they will be maintained for future generations. From 1997 until now, Jasper was only available for emergencies and diversions. It is now available for non-commercial recreational use but a permit must be obtained.

The announcement mentions "installation of a booth for self-regulation and fee collection." The announced fees are \$5 per day, \$50 annually for non-residents (those who are not from the area but will visit regularly) and \$100 annually (including long term parking) for residents.

We expect that details will be listed in the Canada Flight Supplement in an upcoming edition and other education materials will be developed but in the meantime if you have any questions about the use of the airstrips, please contact Banff at 403-762-1510 or Jasper at 780-852-6155.

We are also pleased to see that non-motorized paragliding and hang-gliding are permitted and that additional landing opportunities are provided in Nahanni National Park.

COPA's longstanding concern was for the safety of the traveling public along two important mountain air routes. COPA proved, through a meteorological study (financed by COPA member donations to the Freedom to Fly Fund www.copanational.org/specialaction.cfm) that unpredictable weather could trap pilots. Our concerns were opposed by environmentalists.

We are pleased to see some powerful statements in the announcement. "Studies determined that retirement-from-service of the Banff and Jasper airstrips would increase the risks to pilots and aviation."

"Re-listing the Banff airstrip for emergency and diversionary aircraft use in combination with the implementation of the proposed management approach is expected to achieve the desired conditions associated with wildlife movement, predator/prey dynamics, grassland ecosystems and pilot safety."

"Re-listing the Jasper airstrip for emergency and diversionary purposes and for use by non-commercial recreational aircraft will not result in significant adverse environmental effects at the local or regional scale, with the implementation of mitigation measures."

At the risk of missing someone, I want to demonstrate to readers that it took considerable effort by many volunteers and organizations in support of COPA's efforts. To be successful with the many issues that face our sector requires people to come forward.

Bryn Thomas and the late Dan Bowen from the Jasper Flying Club and Bernie Schiesser and Howard Srigley from the Banff Flying Club put themselves forward in court to test the prohibition on landing at the airstrips. With COPA's Freedom to Fly Fund backing, we succeeded in putting the closures on hold and the court action was the catalyst for a Comprehensive Environmental Assessment (CEA) that demonstrated the safety need for the airstrips.

Participants in that process included the Jasper Flying Club (Bryn Thomas and Tom Bell), Banff Flying Club (Bill Clark), Bob Kirkby (COPA Director and Chair) as well as many COPA members who provided their emergency and diversion experiences as part of the Air Safety Risk Assessment portion of the CEA.

When Minister Baird directed that the airstrips remain open, the resulting draft of regulatory amendments were subject to a public comment period. There were many COPA members who took the time to provide their input. This was instrumental in backing up COPA's position and likely had a key role to play in moving the draft to its final form.

Others who assisted in the effort include Ken Beleshko with Aviation Alberta www.aviationalberta.com , Richard Leavens and Monica Andreeff with the Association for Mountain Parks Protection and Enjoyment www.amppe.org; former Alberta Government Transport Minister and Premier Ed Stelmach and his staff; Members of Parliament Rob Merrifield, Myron Thompson and Blake Edwards, and legal counsel Shawn Beaver.

Special thanks goes to former COPA Chair Ken McNeill for his leadership and to former COPA Chair Bob Kirkby, who kept steady pressure on at the local level and continues to do great work in moving from the regulations to establishing the registration and park fee payment process at Jasper.

Thank you to everyone who came forward to help secure a future for these airstrips.