



Board of County Commissioners - Staff Report

Meeting Date: 4-20-2021

Presenter:

Submitting Dept:

Subject: Proposed Resolution Regarding Grand Teton National Park Helicopter Ban

Statement / Purpose: Statement of intent supporting a ban of helicopter tours over Grand Teton National Park

Background / Description (Pros & Cons): Last spring the Jackson Hole Airport Board approved a permit for Wind River Aviation to operate commercial helicopter tours based out of the airport, which is located within Grand Teton National Park. Sight-seeing helicopter tours, by their very nature, are not compatible with our surrounding communities, public lands and wildlife. The Jackson Hole Airport is already the busiest commercial airport in the state and, since the permit for Wind River Air was approved, there have been at least six violations reported over the park and additional noise and height violation complaints over county residential areas. This commercial use is incompatible with the values of the national park and our gateway community and is the antithesis of the experience that the millions of visitors who come to Grand Teton annually expect when they visit the park. Helicopter tours also can negatively affect other important tourism-related businesses that are critical to our local economy, such as wildlife-touring companies, hiking excursions and floating and fishing outfitters.

The increased noise over one of our country's most iconic national parks has also been disruptive to wildlife, including elk, moose, mule deer, bear, and wolves. Wind River Air tour operators seek out wildlife on adjacent public lands for their passengers' enjoyment and increase low-flying air traffic over the National Elk Refuge, the Bridger-Teton National Forest, and rugged and remote wilderness such as the Jeddiah Smith. These tours operate throughout the year and are active during the winter months when animals are most vulnerable. Commercial tours can also interfere with helicopter search and rescue operations in and around the park that are critical to saving human lives.

Grand Teton National Park is the only national park in the United States that contains an airport that operates under a lease agreement with the National Park Service. The Jackson Hole Airport Board of Directors and Grand Teton National Park managers work cooperatively to decrease noise and impacts over the park through noise reductions plans, and education and outreach to the commercial and private pilots who frequent the Jackson Hole Airport. The additional noise and overflights of these incompatible helicopter tours counteracts the efforts of the airport and park to reduce noise over the park.

Although Wind River Aviation claims their flight plans avoid noise sensitive areas of the park, numerous violations have been reported and even video-taped. Commercial air and helicopter tours have been opposed by the Teton County Commission, the Jackson Town Council, Grand Teton National Park, residential subdivisions and many members of our local community. While helicopter tours may be appropriate in other areas - they are clearly an incompatible use over our Grand Teton National Park, and adjacent public lands.

Attachments: Resolution banning helicopter and air tours over Grand Teton National Park and adjacent public lands.

Input / Recommendation: Approve

Suggested Motion: I move to approve the Resolution calling for a permanent ban of helicopter and air tours over Grand Teton National Park and surrounding public lands and wilderness areas.

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF TETON COUNTY

RESOLUTION # _____

COMMERCIAL HELICOPTER TOURS OVER GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK

WHEREAS, Wind River Air, LLC scenic helicopter tours represents a commercial use that is incompatible with Grand Teton National Park and other surrounding public lands; and

WHEREAS, the mission of Grand Teton National Park (GTNP) is to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System and specifically the resources and values within the boundary of Grand Teton National Park for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations; and

WHEREAS, GTNP is the only national park in the country that has an airport, the Jackson Hole Airport (JHA), within its boundary; and

WHEREAS, the JHA operates under Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) rules and regulations regarding authorized operations and aeronautical activities; and

WHEREAS, those activities include aircraft arrivals and departures necessary for the transportation of people and cargo; and

WHEREAS, those activities also include daily flight operations that are for scenic purposes only and not for passenger transport; and

WHEREAS, multiple daily scenic tours originate from airports outside but on the borders of GTNP and Yellowstone National Park; and

WHEREAS, these flight operations from surrounding airports purport to be for transport but whose documented flight paths clearly indicate are for scenic purposes; and

WHEREAS, the JHA cannot further restrict flight paths because of the federal preemption provided by the Aviation Noise and Capacity Act of 1990; and

WHEREAS, GTNP offers guidance that aircraft should stay 2,000 feet or more above the landscape but that this is only guidance and not a legally enforceable restriction; and

WHEREAS, scenic helicopter tours have created well-documented negative impacts over GTNP and adjacent public lands that include noise, wildlife disturbances, scenic intrusions in viewsheds, potential safety hazards, interference with Teton County Search and Rescue operations and diminished experiences for visitors of the park; and

WHEREAS, Congressional legislation directing the FAA to craft rules and guidance restricting flights for scenic purposes from operating out of Jackson Hole Airport is the most effective method to protect the mission and values of GTNP; and

NOW, THEREFORE, having duly met at a regular meeting and considered the matter, the Teton County Board of County Commissioners, does hereby support a permanent ban of commercial helicopter tours over Grand Teton National Park and adjacent public lands in Teton County, Wyoming, and the Town of Jackson, and seeks Congressional relief through legislation.

Adopted on the ____ day of _____, _____.

TETON COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Natalia D. Macker, Chairwoman

(Seal)

Attest: _____
Maureen E. Murphy, Teton County Clerk