

Methow Conservancy



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Mr. Eric L. Johnson
Construction Project Manager
WSDOT Aviation Division
PO Box 3367
Arlington, WA 98223

April 13, 2009

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail @ JOHNSEL@wsdot.wa.gov

Dear Mr. Johnson,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Methow Conservancy, please accept this letter as part of the recently announced public process associated with the development of an updated Airport Layout Plan for WSDOT's Methow Valley State Airport.

The Methow Conservancy's mission is to inspire people to care for and conserve the land of the Methow Valley, ensuring it will remain a place where future generations can enjoy the rural character and natural beauty we cherish today. Over the past twelve years we have worked to gain the support of over 728 household and 113 business members whose support makes our work possible.

As you are aware, the Methow Conservancy holds property interests in the form of conservation easements on several properties located in the immediate vicinity of Methow Valley State Airport (see enclosed map) as part of the over 5,800 acres we have partnered with private landowners to conserve in the Methow Valley. These conservation easements seek to provide protection to the riparian habitat associated with the Methow River, and the agricultural resources associated with the productive and fertile farm soils found on the valley floor between Winthrop and Twisp.

While safety of airport operations is certainly an important objective, we ask that you please take the time in your planning process to also carefully consider the potential adverse impacts to the high-value agricultural soils and/or riparian habitat as you develop alternatives for addressing identified safety concerns. This is especially important given that the State of Washington has already made significant public investments in conservation efforts adjacent to, and in the vicinity of Methow Valley State Airport.

It is not clear from the information provided at the recent public meetings that enough time has been allocated to these impacts to-date given that any future implementation of the ALP will require NEPA review at the federal level and coordination with agencies which have provided funding for conservation investments dating back over the past 10+ years. It makes little sense to advance plan alternatives to the FAA if these alternatives are likely to prove difficult, or impossible to implement given existing federal policies regarding potential impacts to threatened or endangered species and/or productive farmland.

We understand that the planning process recently made known to the local community in late March was initiated by the WSDOT nearly two years ago for the purpose of qualifying Methow Valley State Airport for a stream of federal funding that is unique to this facility. Despite the length of time that WSDOT has apparently been working to develop the ALP (nearly 600 days), it is not clear that the "maintenance only" alternative (see page 4/2 of March, 2009 Draft), essentially a "No-action" alternative, has been fully explored or considered.

We ask that you consider taking time to further develop such an alternative for public review so that State officials and the local community have an opportunity to understand the benefits and impacts associated by a decision to not seek federal funding for this airport. Given that 15 of the 16 airports managed by WSDOT do not utilize this stream of federal funding, careful evaluation of such an alternative seems prudent.

Additionally, we ask that you and your consultants take time to explore additional alternatives for addressing the conflict(s) at Evans Road. Specifically, we question whether there may be a way to modify the grade of Evans Road to either eliminate or reduce the potential for conflict through adjustments in elevation without impacting riparian habitat or productive agricultural lands.

Finally, we request that the draft ALP be expanded to include information detailing the regulations and process associated with obtaining a variance or waiver from the FAA for specific conformance issues where no reasonable alternative for mitigation exists. To the degree such a process exists, this too should be included as part of the discussion of "No Action" planning alternative.

In closing, we urge the WSDOT to recognize the important value of including public participation by the local community in the development of this, or other, plans for the expansion of public facilities such as Methow Valley State Airport. When invited to participate and collaborate, this community has a history of partnering in the identification of creative solutions and cost-effective alternatives. To date, it is not clear that this process has taken advantage of this resource.

Thank you for your consideration of expanded alternatives that seek to respect the riparian and farmland conservation values identified as important by the local community and as stewarded by private landowners with the support of the Methow Conservancy.

Please feel free to contact me at (509) 996-2870 if you have any questions, or if I can provide additional information regarding the conservation easements held by the Methow Conservancy as they relate to your ALP planning process.

Sincerely,



Jason Paulsen
Executive Director

Enclosure

Cc: Paula Hammond, WSDOT (via electronic mail and hard copy)
Commissioner Bud Hover, Okanogan County (via electronic mail)
Kaleen Cottingham, Washington State RCO (via electronic mail)
Ron Judd, Office of the Governor (via electronic mail)