

Yellowstone Airport prepares for another summer season

By **ABBIE TUMBLESON** West Yellowstone News | Posted: Sunday, May 15, 2011 8:53 pm

The Yellowstone Airport is preparing for another operating season as snowbanks slowly melt, the runway is plowed and boards are taken down from the terminal windows after a long winter.

Delta Connection, operated by SkyWest Airlines, will begin another season of commercial air service for travelers during the June through September operating season.

The idea of providing air service to people visiting Yellowstone National Park through the West Entrance was thought up more than 60 years ago.

The airport was originally a collaborative project, with the Montana Aeronautics Commission, the state of Montana, the National Forest Service, National Park Service and Federal Aviation Agency pitching in to construct an airport, with a vision to provide travelers with seasonal access to Yellowstone National Park.

The airport came to life with the help of funding provided by the National Park Service and the FAA.

"The National Park Service and the FAA paid for the airport to be built," Yellowstone Airport manager Tony Bean said.

The airport needed a place to be constructed once funds were secured. It found a home less than two miles from downtown West Yellowstone along Highway 191.

An article from June 1965 entitled, "The Story of the Yellowstone Airport," written by former assistant director of airports James H. Monger, reported that the National Park Service and the FAA jointly financed the airport and made the funds available to the Montana Aeronautics Commission (the sponsor) for construction of the airport. The U.S. Department of Agriculture National Forest Service deeded the 790 acre-parcel of land that the airport sits on and the actual acreage utilize today is 735 acres. And, original plans designated that the Aeronautics Commission would maintain and operate the airport upon the completion of its construction. Operations plans marked May 1 as the start of the season until the end of November each year when winter hits the region, according to Monger's article.

The airport has a unique operational system that is overseen by the Montana Department of Transportation.

Yellowstone Airport is the only commercial airport owned by the Montana DOT and has the ability to generate income from flights.

The Montana DOT additionally owns 14 public use general aviation airports, which lack commercial air services or facilities and space to generate income, according to the Administrator of the Montana DOT Aeronautics Division Debbie Alke.

The 8,400-foot long runway, that can land small private aircrafts or Air Force One if the president decides to visit the region, is among the income-generating features at the Yellowstone Airport.

Airport facilities don't look like they've changed much since the airport began operating flights in 1965, with the small terminal building adorned with a mixture of retro natural rock walls and tinted windows, giving visitors an expansive view of the runway. More modern signage directs travelers to destinations like the baggage claim and

ticket counter.

The dated building is being cleared of dust and put back into order for the season. Travelers will soon stand in line for flights to Salt Lake City once the flight schedule begins on June 1.

There are two scheduled connection flights a day between Salt Lake City and West Yellowstone during the week and three flights a day throughout the weekend with the current essential air service agreement the airport has with SkyWest Airlines.

"Our operating time was (originally) June to September," Bean said.

The operating season that Bean mentioned has remained the same since the 1970s.

The federal government deregulated air service in 1978 with the Airline Deregulation Act. Essential air service guidelines were then established and the federal government decided that every airport that had service at the time of deregulation would be guaranteed a minimum level of service at their individual facilities, according to Bean.

"When EAS was set up, we had service from June 1 to Sept. 30 and that's what the federal government will guarantee now (with the current EAS services subsidized by the federal government for Yellowstone Airport)," he said.

SkyWest Airlines applied to be the air service carrier for the Yellowstone airport when it started utilizing EAS. The EAS agreement needs to be renewed every two years and SkyWest has been the winning bid as an air service carrier since 1986.

"They are the United States' largest regional carrier. The community is lucky they have them. They're flying 30-seaters in here (the Yellowstone Airport)," Bean said.

An air carrier, like SkyWest, is required to negotiate the subsidy rate for two years at a time with the U.S. Department of Transportation. The annual subsidy rate for SkyWest Airlines is \$427,757, according to Alke.

"It's not always about dollars. The U.S. DOT will award the better carrier, not necessarily the cheaper one, which is good for the community," Bean said.

Although most people are happy to have essential air service at the airport, some believe that air service options for local residents as well as travelers haven't met their full potential in the past.

Some community members believe the airport has the potential to offer more services, or at least an extended season beyond the end of September.

In order for the airport to extend the season, West Yellowstone community members would have to coordinate discussions with the state of Montana and SkyWest to determine if they had the capability and estimate the cost of offering more flights or extended services, according to Bean.

The EAS designation could also be modified, but would have to be congressionally approved for the operating season to extend beyond the current four-month period.

Alke and Bean explained that the process wouldn't be simple if interested parties took that route.

"You would have to discuss with SkyWest what kind of revenue guarantee there would be to provide service for a few additional weeks because they're not in the business to go broke," Bean said.

The topic has been discussed in the past, but not primarily in the last three years, according to West Yellowstone operations manager Jamie Greene.

He also believes there's potential for the airport to handle more air traffic and increased numbers of travelers.

Large aircrafts can be landed at the airport and its location isn't only beneficial to people traveling to and from West Yellowstone, according to Greene.

Travelers could use West Yellowstone as an accessible point to close destinations like Big Sky or Island Park, Idaho.

Greene pointed out that people in San Francisco, for example, could feasibly work on a Friday morning and fish the Madison River in the same day and be back to work on Monday, traveling to the area using the Yellowstone Airport.

Greene explained that the idea of year-round service at Yellowstone Airport does come with its own set of challenges.

"There are realistic challenges associated with keeping it open year-round. One is the logistics of plowing the runway and landing airplanes in weather like we've had this winter," he said.

He does see the airport as a fairly underutilized facility, but pointed out that services have improved in recent years.

"SkyWest wasn't filling that whole four-month period (of their subsidy agreement). The agreement starts on the first of June and they started flying earlier this year (as compared to last season's starting date)," Greene said.

Both Greene and West Yellowstone mayor Jerry Johnson agreed that the town council would consider any proposal that might help the town.

They would listen to future ideas with the same consideration they give to every proposal that is brought to the town council, in the event that a citizen might bring a plan for additional or extended services to be offered at the airport.

"We would look at it," Johnson said. "The airport is something I'm very interested in."

Bean has worked to positively market the airport throughout the last four years and has observed an improved relationship with the town of West Yellowstone and the airport as well as an increase in ridership.

"If you look at it percentage-wise we've increased year after year," Bean said. The airport has seen an increase of more than 600 passengers in the 2010 season, with 4,433 total enplanements compared to 3,829 enplanements during the 2007 season, according to boarding statistics collected by the Montana DOT for airports in the state.

A stronger marketing approach may be to thank for an increased awareness of services offered at the airport last summer.

Yellowstone Airport was awarded a \$105,000 grant in 2008 from the U.S. DOT small community airports fund to help with marketing projects and establish ideas of how to increase ridership, according to West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce accommodations marketing director Jan Stoddard. The accommodations marketing plan also contributed an additional \$5,000 to the airport's marketing campaign.

Numbers showed that the airport had more than 4,000 passengers flying in and out of West Yellowstone last season, averaging about 1,000 people on flights each month.

"Less than one half of one percent of travelers to the West gate go through this airport (to travel to West Yellowstone)," Bean said. "That's not very good utilization of this airport, which prompted us to look at numbers. We found out some people didn't know there was an airport here."

Alke would like to see high seat occupancies being filled again this season. That's figuring in that the aircrafts can fit less than 30 passengers with excess baggage and restrictive weight limits.

Tickets with affordable price tags are also something travelers look for when purchasing flights.

The ticket price for SkyWest flights out of the Yellowstone Airport are comparable with ticket prices to fly to airports in Idaho Falls or Bozeman.

The altitude that the planes fly at and temperature fluctuations account for some empty seats on the plane, depending on how much that particular aircraft becomes weight restricted, according to Bean.

"We take about 27 people per flight, leaving three seats empty. Our utilization of the aircraft that we are being allocated is very good," he said of the Embraer Brasilia planes that SkyWest uses for flights.

Bean has also pondered the potential for future opportunities, such as increased flights, to bring larger quantities of travelers into the airport.

"We're filling our planes, but now the question is are we going to get another plane and is SkyWest going to provide that plane?" Bean said.

Several leaders in the community and the airport manager have kept in mind that Yellowstone Airport is subsidized for four months under the EAS agreement to operate seasonally to accommodate visitors to Yellowstone National Park. But, future options still exist for extended services.

"We'd always like to see additional flights, but you have to be a realist and the airlines have to make a profit. In the long run, yes SkyWest has been a good partner with us in West Yellowstone and we've tried to work with them to do some things that they could do to increase their profitability," airport advisory board member Bill Howell said.

He has seen the airport transition through a number of air service carriers since he moved to West Yellowstone in 1984. Howell recalls how nice it was to have a regular flight from West Yellowstone to Denver with services offered in the past. He would like to see that option offered again someday in the future.

"I'm always hopeful for new and different things, but some risk is involved," he said.

The Montana DOT will continue to look at options for improvements to service at the airport in the future, but doesn't have any current plans to extend the season, according to Alke.

For now, airport staffers are busy inspecting equipment, clearing the runway and finishing their spring cleaning before the season starts in June. If something isn't in working order, any repairs or improvements for the 2011 operating season will have to come out of the current \$78,000 limited operating budget, according to Alke.

Once systems are up and running though, the airport will transform into a busily functioning entity complete with runway lights guiding planes flying through night skies and travelers that come along with their own set of seasonal adventures.