

Air Tour Management Plan – Frequently Asked Questions

Glacier National Park

What are the existing commercial air tour operations at the park? How would conditions under the ATMP be different than what is currently occurring?

- Under interim operating authority, the three operators who are currently operating are authorized to fly a combined total of 891 commercial air tours per year over the Park. Interim operating authority does not set routes or operating conditions for an operator except to limit the number of air tours the operator is permitted to fly each year. On average from 2017-2019, 144 commercial air tours, by these three operators, occurred per year over the Park. There were two other operators conducting air tours between 2017-2019, but those operators surrendered their interim operating authority and no longer have the authority to conduct air tours. ATMPs include conditions designed to protect natural and cultural resources and visitor experience. These conditions may include the number of authorized air tours, routes, altitude, aircraft type, day or time restrictions, and restrictions for particular events.

Does the proposed ATMP require that air tours follow specific routes and/ or fly at certain altitudes?

- Yes, Section 3.2 of the ATMP specifies routes and altitudes. Except when necessary for takeoff or landing, or in an emergency or to avoid unsafe conditions, or unless otherwise authorized for a specified purpose, upon approval of the final ATMP, the operator would not be able to deviate from the routes and altitudes in the ATMP.

Does the proposed ATMP specify when commercial air tours could occur? Why are those conditions recommended?

- Yes. Sections 3.4, 3.5, and Appendix A of the ATMP specify proposed days and times when air tours may occur. ATMPs include conditions designed to protect natural and cultural resources and visitor experience. These conditions may include the number of authorized air tours, routes, altitude, aircraft type, day or time restrictions, and restrictions for particular events.

Why are specific operating conditions recommended in the proposed ATMP?

- ATMPs include conditions designed to protect natural and cultural resources and visitor experience. These conditions may include the number of authorized air tours, routes, altitude, aircraft type, day or time restrictions, and restrictions for particular events. Section 3 of the draft ATMP provides the proposed operating conditions at the Park.

How does the proposed ATMP protect wilderness character and opportunities for solitude in wilderness?

- The proposed annual flight limits, routes, minimum altitudes in this ATMP are intended to protect wilderness and visitor experience by limiting the number of potential disturbances caused by commercial air tours, by providing opportunities for solitude and remoteness from sights and sounds in the recommended wilderness, and by reducing the intensity of air tour noise at ground level. The hours of operation would provide quiet periods of the day during which visitors can enjoy natural sounds and preserves opportunities for solitude.

Would commercial air tours be visible to park visitors?

- In some cases, yes. Glacier has had a long history of commercial air tours over the park. The park has received more comments on impacts to visitors by helicopters than almost any other issue. Under the proposed ATMP, however, the reduced number of flights per year, as compared to the three-year average (2017-2019), would result in a reduced number of air tours being visible to park visitors. Whether a visitor on the ground sees a commercial air tour aircraft depends on a number of factors including how often tours occur, the time of day of the occurrence(s), proximity to the flight path, altitude, topography, and the presence of other sounds that may mask detection. Visitors near an air tour's flight path are more likely to see and hear the aircraft passing overhead; however, a viewer's eye is often drawn to the horizon to take in a park view, and aircraft at higher altitudes are less likely to be noticed. Aircraft at lower altitudes may attract visual attention but are also more likely to be screened by vegetation or terrain. Aircraft are transitory elements in a scene and visual impacts tend to be relatively short.

Would park visitors be able to hear commercial aircraft tours from the ground?

- In some cases, yes. As stated above, Glacier has a long history of commercial air tours over the park and it has been the subject of more complaint letters to the park than almost any other issue. Noise is one of the most frequent complaints from visitors particularly in the backcountry and wilderness areas of the park. Under the proposed ATMP, the reduced number of flights per year would result in a reduced number of air tours, as compared to the three-year average (2017-2019), and therefore noise impacts to park visitors. Whether a visitor on the ground can hear a commercial air tour depends on a number of factors, including proximity to the flight path, type of aircraft, other sources of noise, and surrounding landscape features. Visitors near an aircraft's flight path are more likely to hear the aircraft passing overhead, but other noise sources such as vehicles, people, insects and other wildlife activity, wind, and precipitation can mask the sound of an aircraft. Terrain features and buildings, which block the direct line-of-sight between a noise source and a visitor also may have an effect.

How does the proposed ATMP seek to protect cultural resources?

- The proposed annual flight limits in this draft ATMP are intended to protect cultural resources and related cultural landscapes and ethnographic resources throughout the Park by limiting the number of potential disturbances caused by commercial air tours. The ATMP may include additional conditions as identified during consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The route and altitude conditions would improve conditions at cultural properties and landscapes by reducing the intensity of air tour noise at ground level.

How would the proposed ATMPs protect tribal lands, properties, ceremonies, or practices?

- The proposed ATMP allows restrictions for particular events, which are intended to prevent noise interruptions of Park events or tribal practices. The ATMP may include additional conditions as identified during consultation with tribes under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, including protections for tribal lands outside the park but within ½ mile outside of the Park boundary.

How does the proposed ATMP implement the decision in the park's General Management Plan?

- The proposed ATMP is consistent with the decision in the Record of Decision for the General Management Plan to phase out commercial air tour activity. The proposed ATMP does not

authorize new air tour businesses, and prohibits existing air tour businesses from transferring their allocations to successor purchasers. Thus, the proposed ATMP would phase out commercial air tour activity over time through attrition.