

July 14, 2010 - "So, do you fly out of a farm field?"

I recently received this e-mailed question from someone who has been reading my photo blog about my experiences while here in South Dakota. Well, the answer is, "no, not really". While the Custer County airport is not the busiest that I have ever been at, it is probably one of the better technology speaking. The office is manned from 8 to 4, seven days a week. (I handle 3 of those days) It has a 60 foot wide, more than a mile long paved runway. Airport information with regard to winds, altimeter setting and density altitude is provided continuously via radio transmission. The pilots lounge is large, airy and comfortable with big, overstuffed leather chairs and sofa along with a large screened TV, with movies. There is crew rest quarters with bed, tables & TV located upstairs. The grounds are meticulously maintained (and I occasionally run the tractor pulling the grass mower to accomplish this end). Self service aviation and jet fuel is available 24/7 and the field has a full time mechanic, a Civil Air Patrol wing, and a 7 day a week US Forest Service task force.

The airport services mainly the tourist industry here in the Black Hills, but does get a varied mix of corporate, political and even commercial usage. For example, just the other day a S.D. State Senator arrived for a political event in a King Air 200, which is a large turbo-prop cabin class twin. Yesterday a Chicago based 500 m.p.h., 8 passenger Lear Jet 60 arrived with its two charter pilots. They had dropped their single passenger off in Casper, Wyoming earlier in the day. He deplaned with his high tech bicycle in order to join a tour group and then peddle the 200+ miles back to Custer, at which time he would be returning to Chicago. ~~(click here for video of Learjet taking off)~~ Earlier in the week a large twin rotor Boeing helicopter arrived to base for the 3-4 month fire season. That machine is capable of hauling up to 6 thousand gallons of water at a single lift to the location of a forest fire. It had just flown in from fighting fires in Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico and would be spending the remainder of the season here in Custer (unless called out to more pressing locations). ~~(click here for video of Boeing helicopter taking off)~~ Another smaller Jet Ranger soon joined it to act as a liaison and scouting craft for fires and to bring "smoke jumpers" to the scene of the blaze. Another King Air arrived bringing a family of 5 to a reunion to be held at one of the areas resorts. Each day a couple of airplanes arrive to spend the night, and others come in only to fuel and be on their way again. Local based aircraft will go out for a visit to adjacent airports, or simply practice their take off and landings. This is the pattern at most general aviation airports all over the country and Custer County Airport is no exception. While not as busy as my home field at Hilton Head Island, SC, on some days it is a pretty hopping place.



Privately owned \$8 million Learjet, parked on the ramp



This is just a portion of the ramp GA tie down area



Lear business jet, framed against my plane's tail



The fire fighting helicopter based for the summer



Fire fighting Scout Helicopter and its support truck