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ON THE NOTION OF TRIBAL SPACEPORTS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract

There are currently 574 sovereign tribal nations in the United States (U.S.) with 229 in Alaska and the remainder spread across 35 other states. Of these, the U.S. Government holds approximately 56 million acres of land trusts, much of which lies inland. As the U.S. looks inland to increase launch and reentry capacity, the notion of tribal spaceports is an option to be explored. For this research, a tribal spaceport is owned and operated by members of an American Indian tribe or tribes and is built on tribal-approved available land for commercial use.

The main objective of this research is to assess the feasibility of tribal spaceports from multiple perspectives using both primary and secondary data. First, a survey of American Indians was conducted on their knowledge of space opportunities for indigenous communities and the practicality of a tribal spaceport. Results indicate an openness to the concept of a tribal spaceport, either in partnership with government entities or solely owned and operated, particularly for the economic benefits gained. However, significant barriers exist that must be overcome, including an elevated level of distrust toward non-tribal entities and a prevailing belief that space opportunities do not exist for tribal nations. Second, tribal airport capabilities were examined for basic infrastructure and location vis-à-vis spaceport development prospects using secondary data obtained from the United States National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS). Initial results indicate a lack of necessary infrastructure for the most basic of air and space port operations. However, possibilities exist for development, particularly inland areas where land, air space, and other resources are available.

While barriers to tribal spaceports appear challenging, solutions begin with dialogue, outreach and education on spaceport opportunities and challenges for the tribal nations. Creation of trust-filled partnerships, backed by government support and prudent policies, are requisite. Unique conditions of utilizing trust land for commercial spaceports, if applicable, must be identified and issues resolved. Incorporating tribal perspectives for cultural considerations, despite differences in space knowledge, is critical. The continuous implementation of guides and training not only unlock potential solutions by consulting with tribal nations but can also foster creativity. Implications of this research can extend beyond the United States, benefiting other government entities and indigenous communities seeking an entrance into the global spaceport industry.