

When Private Jets Ferry Billionaires to Small-Town Idaho

Every July, as the elite Sun Valley conference kicks off, one man shepherds multimillion-dollar private planes and some of the world's most powerful people.

By Benjamin Mullin

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HAILEY, Idaho — Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots, flies in a Gulfstream G650. So do Jeff Bezos and Dan Schulman, PayPal's chief executive. The jets, roughly 470 of which are in operation, retail for about \$75 million each.

Most days, those planes are spread out, ferrying captains of industry to meetings around the globe. But for one week in July, some of them converge on a single 100-foot-wide asphalt runway beside the jagged hills of Idaho's Wood River Valley.

The occasion is the annual Sun Valley conference, a shoulder-rubbing bonanza organized by the secretive investment bank Allen & Company. Known as “summer camp for billionaires,” the conference kicks off this year on Tuesday, and it draws industry titans and their families — some of whom are watched over by local babysitters bound by nondisclosure agreements. In between organized hikes and fly-fishing at past gatherings, there have been sessions on creativity, climate change and immigration reform.

For decades at these secluded gatherings, chief executives and board chairmen have made deals that have shaped the TV we watch, the news we consume and the products we buy. It is where, near the ninth hole of the golf course, the head of General Electric expressed interest in selling NBC to Comcast. It is where Mr. Bezos met with the owner of The Washington Post before agreeing to buy the paper, and where Disney pursued a plan to purchase ABC — with Warren Buffett at the center of the discussions.

It is also the biggest week of the year for Chris Pomeroy, the director of Friedman Memorial Airport and the man responsible for making sure all the moguls come and go smoothly.





Chris Pomeroy runs Friedman Memorial Airport, which can handle more than 300 flights within 24 hours during the Sun Valley conference. Ellen Hansen for The New York Times

In the months before the conference starts, Mr. Pomeroy prepares to play a high-stakes, three-dimensional game of Tetris with multimillion-dollar private jets as attendees travel to Sun Valley, a resort town with a year-round population of 1,800.

During a 24-hour period last year as the conference began, more than 300 flights passed through Friedman Memorial Airport in Hailey, a small town near Sun Valley, according to data from Flightradar24, an industry data firm. They ranged from tiny propeller planes to long-wing commercial jets. By comparison, two weeks ago, when Mr. Pomeroy gave me a brief tour of the airport, just 44 flights took off or landed there over 24 hours, according to the data firm.

“This is empty right now,” Mr. Pomeroy said, smoothly steering his white 2014 Ford Explorer (what he calls his “mobile command center”) past a swath of freshly paved asphalt. “But in the summer, and during the event in particular, there’s airplanes parked everywhere up here.”

Much like the activities of the conference, elements of the travel there are shrouded in secrecy. Many jets flying in are registered to obscure owners and limited liability companies, some with only winking references to their passengers. The jet that carried Mr. Kraft last year, for example, is registered under “Airkraft One Trust,” according to records from the Federal Aviation Administration. The plane that Mr. Bezos flew in on is registered to Poplar Glen, a Seattle firm.

Representatives for Mr. Kraft and Mr. Bezos declined to comment. Mr. Bezos is not expected to turn up at Sun Valley this year, according to an advance list of guests that was obtained by The New York Times.



The airport's terminal. Mr. Pomeroy calls the conference, which will open Tuesday, "the annual fly-in event." Ellen Hansen for The New York Times

Mr. Pomeroy plans well in advance to deal with the intense air traffic generated by the conference, which he refers to obliquely as "the annual fly-in event." Without proper organization, flocks of private jets could stack up in the airspace around Friedman, creating delays and diversions while pilots burn precious fuel.

That was the case for the 2016 conference, which coincided with Mr. Pomeroy's first week on the job. That year, some aircraft circled overhead or sat on the tarmac for more than an hour and a half, waiting for the airspace and runway to clear.

"I saw airplanes literally lined up to take off from the north end of the field almost all the way down to the south end of the field," Mr. Pomeroy said, referring to the 7,550-foot runway. "Tail to nose, all the way up the taxiway."

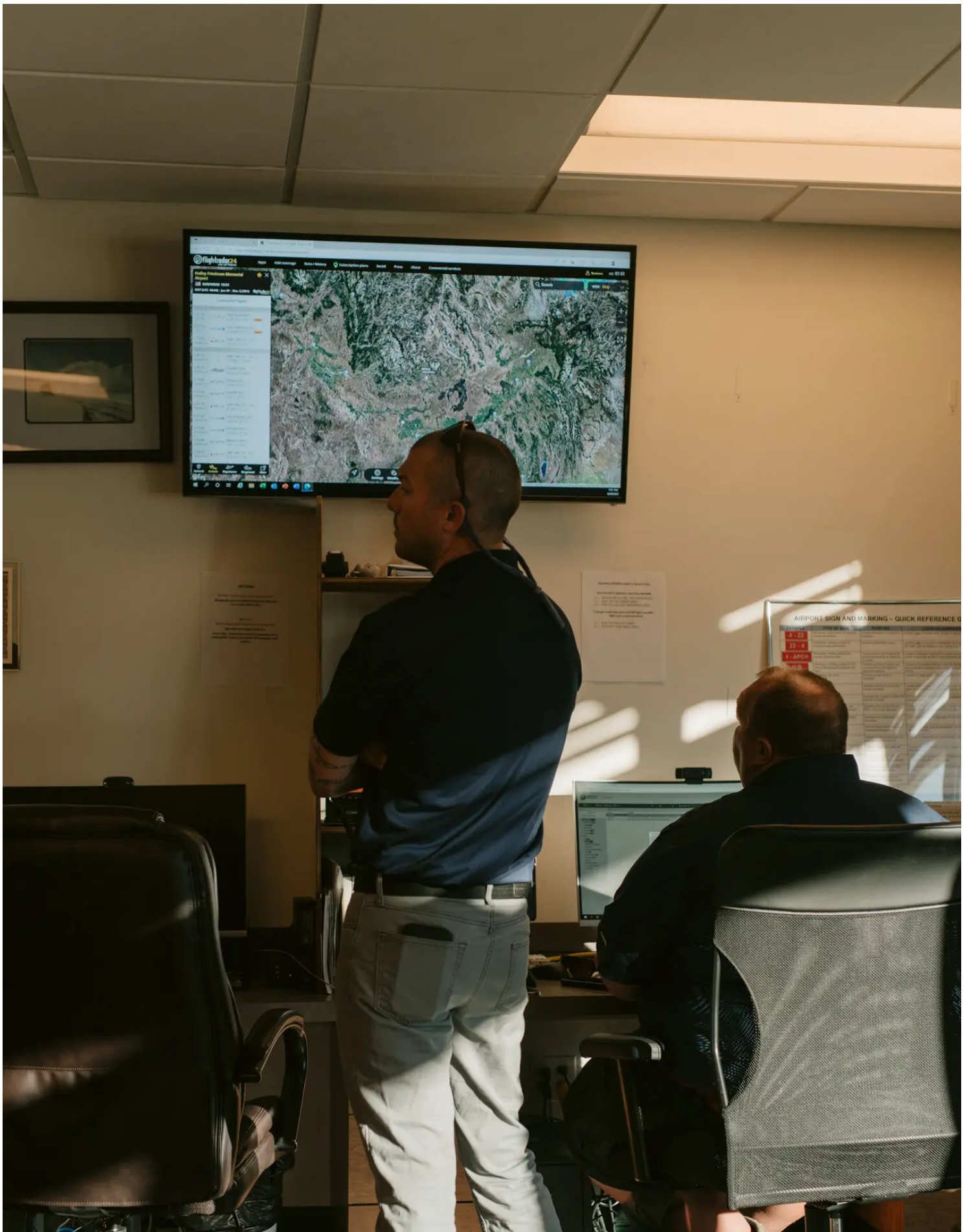
After that episode, Mr. Pomeroy enlisted Greg Dyer, a former district manager at the F.A.A., to help unclutter the tarmac. The two coordinated with an F.A.A. hub in Salt Lake City to line up flights, sometimes 300 to 500 miles outside Sun Valley. For some flights, the staging begins before the planes take off.

"Before, it looked like an attack — it was just airplanes coming from all points of the compass, all trying to get here at the same time," said Mr. Dyer, an airport consultant for Aviation-Woolpert.

Last year, delays were kept to a minimum, and no commercial travelers missed connecting flights because of air traffic caused by the conference, Mr. Pomeroy said.



A United Airlines flight. Commercial fliers missed no connections during last year's conference. Ellen Hansen for The New York Times





Staff at Friedman, which Mr. Pomeroy has led since 2016. Ellen Hansen for The New York Times

Despite the additional effort, some passengers said they still experienced delays. Anthony Patterson, a Seattle resident, said that his wife's flight on Alaska Airlines took off several hours after it was originally supposed to leave Friedman Memorial Airport on July 10, the final day of last year's conference. Asked about the delay, Mr. Dyer said smoke from wildfires had affected some people's travel last year.

When moguls are forced to circle in the air, they often loiter in great style. Buyers willing to shell out tens of millions for a high-end private plane are unlikely to balk at an additional \$650,000 to outfit the aircraft with Wi-Fi, said Lee Mindel, one of the founders of SheltonMindel, an architectural firm that has designed the interiors of Gulfstream and Bombardier private jets. Some owners, he said, have opted for bespoke flatware from Muriel Grateau in Paris, V'Soske rugs or other luxe features.

"If you have to ask what it costs, you really can't afford to do it," Mr. Mindel said.

During the pandemic, when commercial travel slowed because of restrictions, corporate jaunts increased among a subset of executives who didn't want to be held back, said David Yermack, a professor at New York University's Stern School of Business. He added that it might be cheaper in the long run to compensate chief executives with jet travel than pay them with cash.

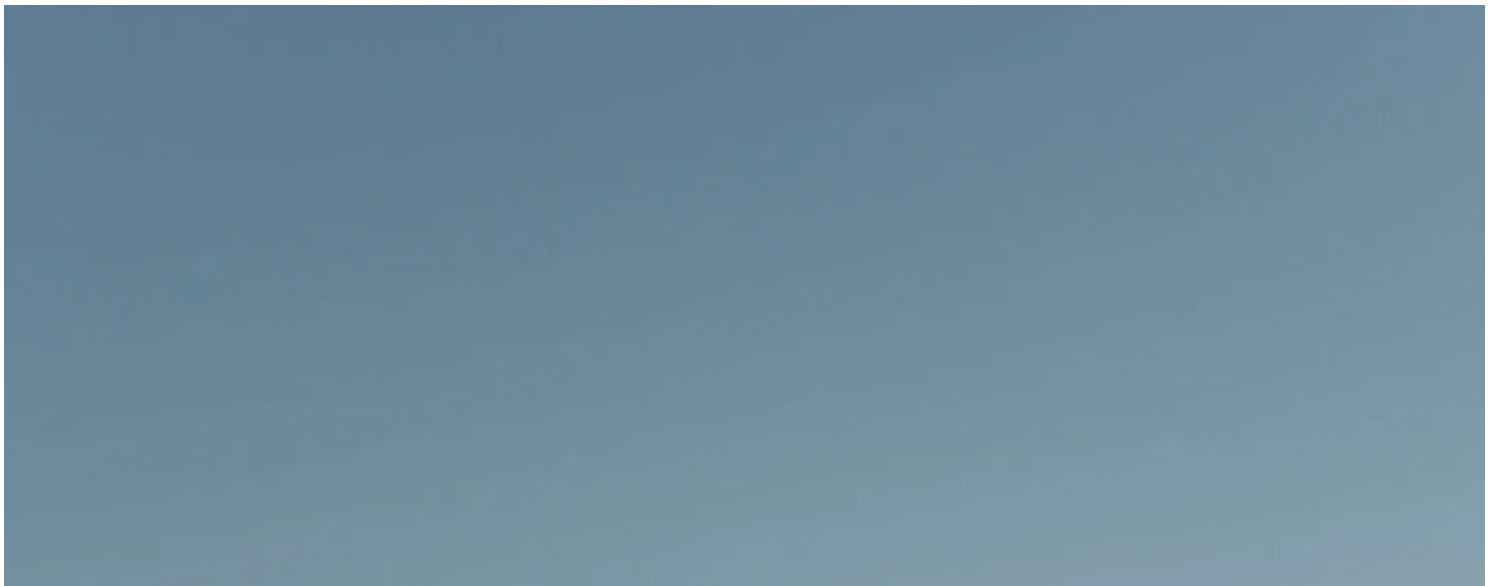
"I think it was Napoleon who said, 'When I realized people would lay down their lives for little pieces of colored ribbon, I knew I could conquer the world,'" Mr. Yermack said.

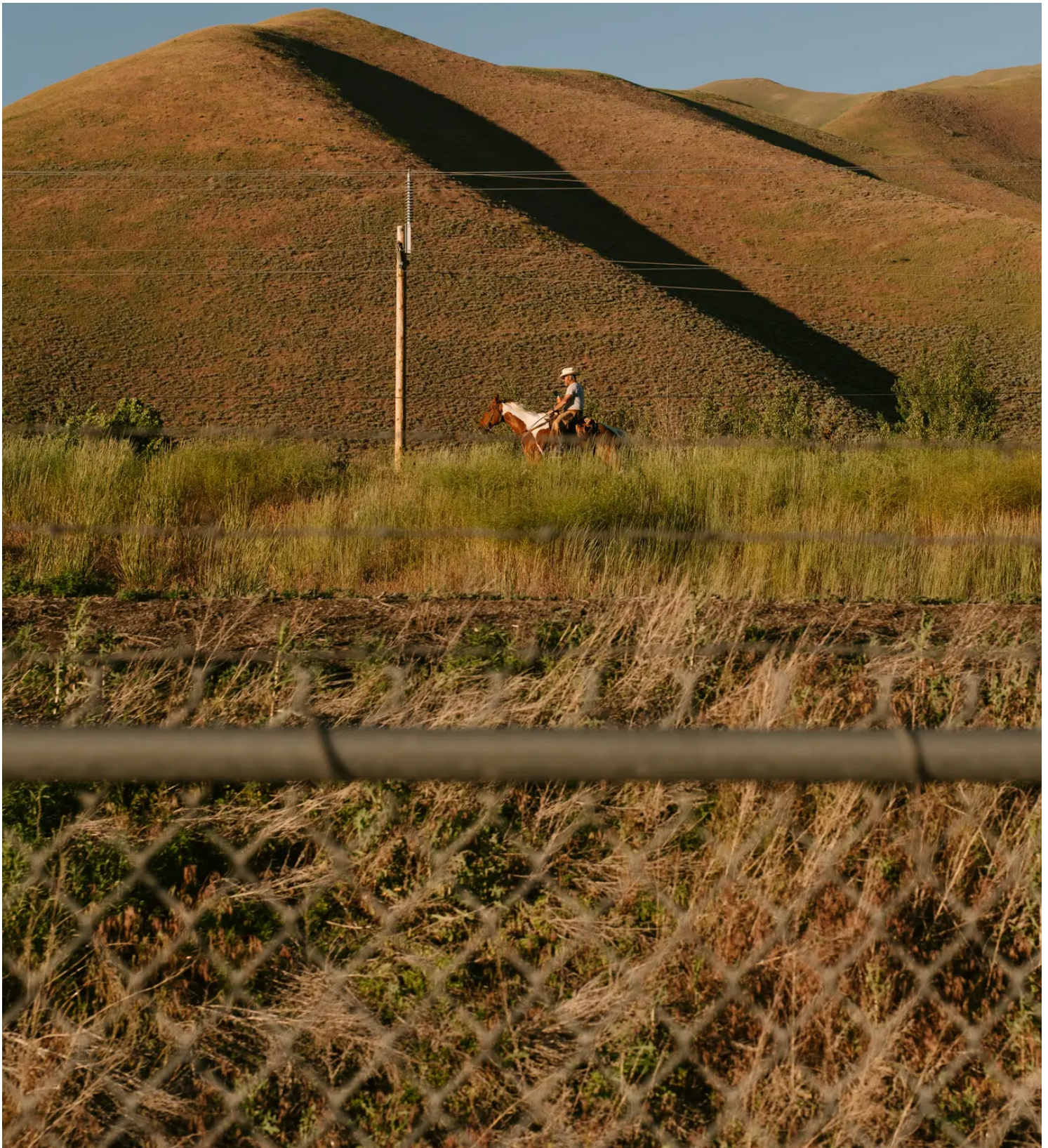
The glut of flights certainly raises practical concerns. The residents of Hailey, as well as nearby Ketchum and Sun Valley, have complained in the past about the noise created by the jets zooming into Friedman Memorial Airport.





Planes going to the conference range from tiny propeller planes to long-wing commercial jets. Ellen Hansen for The New York Times





The airfield is beside the jagged hills of Idaho's Wood River Valley. Ellen Hansen for The New York Times

To deal with the complaints, Mr. Pomeroy and the Friedman Memorial Airport Authority curtailed flights between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. and limited the number of takeoffs and landings from the north, over the little city of Hailey.

Before the conference, Mr. Pomeroy sends a letter to incoming pilots about what to expect, admonishing them to keep the noise to a minimum.

“While the overwhelming majority of users during this event are respectful of our program and community, only a few operators who blatantly disregard our program, or who are negligent in educating themselves about our program, leave a negative impression on all of us,” Mr. Pomeroy wrote this year.

Allen & Company’s stinginess about some conference details extends to the airport. But Mr. Pomeroy and his team get enough information to conclude when the moguls will arrive and are about to leave town.

When the schmoozing is over next week, Mr. Pomeroy will begin the arduous task of ushering the corporate titans out of Idaho. Often that means closing the airport briefly to arrivals while they hustle out departures for an hour.

As the last jets get ready to leave, Mr. Pomeroy said, he and his team breathe a sigh of relief.

“Afterward, I am ready to hit the river for some serious fly-fishing for a day or two,” he said.



Ushering the corporate titans out of Idaho at the end of the conference often means closing the airport briefly to other flights. Ellen Hansen for The New York Times