

Letters to the Editor

Safety and money

Sir,

I am certain to be one of many pilots to be appalled at the news that VORs are to be phased out (*General Aviation*, Oct 2009). Like the threat against the IMC rating, this seems to be yet another poorly thought through erosion of practical flight safety, in the name of cost cutting, and particularly galling against the background of the considerable money and effort being squandered on meaningless changes to bureaucratic legislation on aircraft maintenance, mandatory equipment, traffic procedures, licensing, and so on.

I fly in the busy airspace of the South East, and use my GPS as my *primary* navigation instrument (used intelligently, they do keep you out of restricted airspace!) but I always have a fallback Plan B to radio navigation, chart and DI. When the GPS signal fails, and it does happen every so often, there is a lot of comfort in having RNAV to seamlessly fall back on in poor conditions. The Dover VOR is a particularly good one, shining like a beacon forty plus miles into France, to bring us safely back to Blyth if need be.

If GPS is to be the only navigation instrument, then things will get interesting if the signal fails in poor conditions, when dead reckoning goes out of the window. (And if anyone is tempted to say you should never be flying in poor conditions, they don't live in the real world of the weather conditions in Northern Europe).

I note that VORs will not be abandoned altogether until the Galileo satellite system is in place. Forgive my cynicism, but the record of Europe in achieving and maintaining anything is pretty poor, and given the US is falling behind on its satellite replacement program, you may be sure that, once Galileo is active, those satellites they do replace will not be the ones over Europe! So, what we probably have to look forward to is a less reliable and possibly costly GPS system, no VORs, and probably no IMC rating to give pilots the tools to use them. The only thing which will remain the same will be the weather!

It is a sad reflection that, despite the vast sums we are forced to fork out to continue flying, aviation seems set to become less safe. However, I suppose the silver lining (and that's only if we were allowed to fly in any cloud) is

that for the few who can still afford and qualify to fly, there will be far fewer aircraft in the air, and many more rules to keep them safe!

Andrew Mumford

We're on a loser here. VORs are paid for by the airlines, and their upkeep falls on a subsidiary of NATS, the privatised air traffic control organisation owned by the airlines. In arguing that GA should not pay en-route charges, AOPA has always said VORs were not installed for the benefit of GA; if we now decide we want them, we'll have to decide how much we're prepared to pay. Replacement costs run into many millions; even running costs are beyond our means. – Pat Malone

Safety and money II

Sir

In response to your article "Pay as you talk" *safety blow* (October edition of *General Aviation*), I want to clarify Ofcom's proposed pricing for VHF frequencies used by the aeronautical sector.

We are not proposing to sell off aeronautical VHF frequencies to local taxi firms as you claim. As your article noted, these frequencies are subject to international treaties, and it is highly unlikely that other sectors of the economy could use these frequencies without infringing the UK's obligations to ensure non-interference with aeronautical use.

The reason why we have proposed to apply AIP to aeronautical VHF communications frequencies is that demand for these from the aeronautical community itself is expected to continue to exceed supply. We believe that fees may help to manage that demand by making individual aerodromes and providers of air traffic services think about their future spectrum needs. Some will choose to organise themselves differently, thereby freeing up some frequencies for others.

We do not expect to see big changes overnight, as many users are very constrained, but over time we do think fees will start to have a meaningful impact on the way this scarce resource is used. Fees may also accelerate the transition to more efficient technologies. Our statutory duties do not allow us to consider the revenue raising potential of AIP fees.

We aim to publish revised proposals later this year on spectrum used for aeronautical VHF communications and will welcome the views of the GA community. This may also be a good opportunity for you to set out your apparent concerns over our proposed role for Government and radar and navigational aids; it would be good to know why you think this will amount to just more bureaucracy.

Safety remains a top priority when we consider changes to fees and we are working closely with the Civil Aviation Authority to ensure any concerns are addressed.

Michael Richardson, Spectrum Policy Manager Ofcom

Oh, please. The reason there's a frequency shortage in our sector is because European countries refuse to replace the allocation offices with two guys in Brussels, as IAOPA has suggested. NATO has done it, and cured its chronic frequency shortages at a stroke. Britain, France and Germany are the only three nations objecting to such a move, saying it's a matter of 'national sovereignty'. What they mean is that they've seen an opportunity to cash in, and Ofcom has been tasked to do the dirty work. Save us the pious sentiments about safety. – Pat Malone

Alternative fuel

Sir,

I read the article 'A new way to sustainable aviation fuel' (*General Aviation*, October 2009) by Prof Marmont, with great interest. He has identified the fact that, whilst a number of green energy sources are being developed for surface transport, no work appears to be being done for aviation beyond some trials with biomass derived fuel.

The process which he describes would fill the gap and provide adequate fuel supplies without any impact on agriculture (which biomass does). However, he does not mention two major obstacles:

1. The oil companies have invested trillions of pounds/dollars in oil exploration, development, refining and distribution and they will certainly not want any competing technology to affect the return on their investments. So whilst they would be the potential users of the process on a large scale they will not be interested until oil reserves become significantly depleted. They also control the distribution network and will not want to facilitate a competing product. So Prof Marmont's product would be a niche product, rather like avgas.

2. For any industrial scale process, large quantities of input energy (electricity) are required 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Prof Marmont's figures for wind energy are probably basically correct but he ignores the seasonal and short term variations in wind speed and location which make that an unsuitable source. There is only one which fits the bill as a zero CO2 source and that is nuclear power. Once a new generation of

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nuclear power stations are built and in commission, the energy will be available to support an industrial scale application of the process.

Gordon Alder, DipEE, CEng, MIET

When the wind blows

Sir,
Regarding crosswind limits (*General Aviation*, Oct 2009) there are two types of pilot, those who fly naturally and those who fly by numbers. The latter will calculate or use a chart to get the crosswind component and will veer off the runway when the unexpected gust hits them. The others will know instinctively if the plane/pilot combination can handle the situation. Since the pilot notes for older planes seldom have published crosswind limits, perhaps it should follow that fly-by-numbers pilots should not fly vintage machines. Sadly we see numerous cases of a decent plane being mashed by these types, but who can write a rule to prevent them

My concern is that should the CAA/EASA get in on the act they will decide that planes in which the pilot notes have no reference to limits will have to undergo a review, on the grounds of improving flight safety. Also I have yet to see limits given for grass – in my experience it is possible to land with at least 10 kts more crosswind component on grass.

Howard Cox

Sir,
I have flown with many instructors and have picked up many bits of information about crosswind limits, some of them almost certainly untrue as they're not all compatible with one another! Some say a demonstrated

crosswind component is not a limit. Others say it is the maximum you can get away with without corrective action. Still others say it is the maximum that a test pilot thought was reasonably manageable and is legally binding. About the only thing that seems certain is that if you have an accident while exceeding it, your insurance company will protest.

This raises the interesting problem of trying to work out the exact crosswind by looking at the windsock from 2000 feet above a grass airfield with no ATC. I've often taken off with winds within limits, yet had to put down in unexpectedly stronger than forecast winds. After all, if I'm comfortable with the approach, and no wind information is given, how am I to know? At ATC airfields, I agree that the current wind check is not a lot of use. To be honest, I listen to the strength, the angle goes out of the other ear, land, and then think "what did they say again?" I'd rather push on with a manageable approach than distract myself with mental arithmetic.

Although normally a very cautious pilot, I'm quite happy to go up in wild conditions with instructors, as it seems like a good opportunity to challenge myself with someone who knows what they're doing! Whether that's wise or not is up for discussion, but pilots can be a gung ho lot, maybe me included when supervised – after all, instructors are pretty good pilots, so what can possibly go wrong?

I like to challenge my personal limits by a small amount, as that's a good way to gain experience and skill. I can see how eventually you reach the aircraft's limits, find them manageable, and keep on going till you find something that isn't. Obviously taking this attitude too far can have disastrous results.

Nick Lee

Sir,
I read your article with interest as I've spent a lot of time in recent weeks dealing with this in practice as we've had a spell of strong winds and gusts. I presume the researchers weren't pilots? My Archer II has max demonstrated crosswind of 17kts but I've coped with winds well in excess of this many times. In recent experience I've landed at St Mary's on 27 with wind 330/24G34, and similar scenarios at Cranfield and Kemble. I suspect that in common with most pilots I wouldn't dream of attempting a precise number and wouldn't believe one if I was given it. In the example above, the clock rule (read off the DI) shows 60 deg from the right and at that level I'd assume 100% crosswind. Any less than 60 I'd assume "not quite as bad as full crosswind". If it's just stupid I'll divert elsewhere, but at these levels I'll give it a go and be prepared to throw it away at any point. In practical terms it involves crabbing down the final approach in the landing configuration and then converting to wing down approach in the last 50 ft or so. At that point if I can more or less hold the centre line I'm there, otherwise it's go around time.

It's quite satisfying to complete a successful landing one wheel at a time! I don't want or need the proposed recommendations, thank you very much!

John K. Milner

Thanks for all those who wrote similar letters on crosswinds; the unanimous consensus is that things should be left well alone. Thanks also to all those who took the trouble to write in response to the Met Office initiative on GA weather services. Letters have been collated for the Met Office and will form the basis of the next discussion. – Pat Malone ■

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