

General Aviation

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Chairman's message

Effective lobbying

How do you place a value on something intangible, something that cannot be put in the market place to test its worth? Not the easiest thing in the world, but when the possibility of having it taken away arises, it certainly sharpens up the value judgements, especially if its loss would be sharply or even painfully felt. This has been the case with the IMC rating, the future existence of which looked shaky once EASA started taking an interest in pilot licensing in 2007, but was then seriously threatened following the deliberations of FCL 008, a working group set up by EASA to advise it on a range of particular pilot licensing matters. What followed is well known, as AOPA's campaign and lobbying efforts to maintain this valuable rating received strong support from the pilot community and considerable publicity in the aviation press. The CAA has made it clear that it is its policy to retain the IMC rating, and sent two senior representatives to a recent meeting with EASA top ranking officials, also attended by Martin Robinson and Nick Wilcock on behalf of AOPA UK, at which EASA agreed to "grandfather" IMC rating holders for life, as a first step. This will allow pilots already with the rating, and those who have gained it before EASA takes over licensing completely in April 2012, to continue to use it. This is a hugely welcome step, but much work remains to be done to retain continued issuance of the rating beyond that date.



The other current important privilege that could disappear is the ability to operate third country (i.e. non-European) registered aircraft in Europe. In this context, "third country" effectively means N-registered, since by far the largest proportion of such registrations is from the USA, with N-registered general aviation aircraft accounting for maybe 20 percent of all GA aircraft based in Europe. There are sound reasons for some owners who are not US citizens why the N-register is the best place for their aircraft, but there has never been any suggestion that the regime carries safety implications. EASA has been extremely underhand, though maybe unintentionally to some small degree, in devising a method of eliminating this means of operating GA aircraft from Europe in future years by using its flight crew licensing powers. Removal of this sector of GA not only impacts the owners and pilots but the many SMEs and other services involved; the resulting loss of millions of euros of business is hardly in line with the EC's aim of expansion of the internal market. No safety case has been made for this proposed restrictive practice, the whole issue having a strong political reek about it. But here again, with AOPA's intervention, some breathing space has been gained to allow discussion before EASA's intentions become too crystallised.

These two examples show the vital need for constant and effective lobbying if GA is not to suffer in the future from overburdensome and inappropriate regulation that degrades its future viability. This is something that AOPA is good at, and, judging from recent website forum postings, something many pilots and owners recognise and are thankful for. IAOPA Europe has now organised itself so as to be able to act in this way, and is also becoming stronger, partly in reaction to EASA's heavy-handedness, but largely due to the vision and drive of its Senior Vice President, Martin Robinson, our own AOPA UK's CEO. The smaller AOPAs in Europe have been encouraged to raise their presence within their own GA communities, AOPA Ireland only recently having become operational again after a non-active period. And continuous vigilance is necessary; some things keep coming back even after they have been kicked into touch, VFR charging being one such – a favourite with the airlines, even though the administration costs are prohibitive.

All pilots and aircraft owners, members of AOPA and non-members alike, benefit when sensible argument backed up by effective lobbying protects the future viability of general aviation in this country and beyond. But it is only you, the AOPA members, who provide the financial wherewithal to support this important function, and if the opportunity arises, please don't hesitate to make the point to a non-member, ideally with the effect of encouraging him or her to join up.

George Done