

We can do something about air safety in the bush

Many of Alaska's aviation pioneers worked very hard over the past half century to establish a tradition of safe and reliable air travel in Alaska. However, there were a few of the early bush pilots who became legend merely because they were able to survive a number of their own flights. We suspect that situation has not changed a great deal in the last 50 years or so.

In many of the rural transportation centers, air taxi services and local carriers operate reputable businesses and have safe and comfortable air travel as the top priority. The job is somewhat easier in this age, with the availability of superbly engineered aircraft and sophisticated avionics and navigational systems. The people who hand cleared the runway currently in use at Telida may disagree, but for the most part airports and ground facilities have been vastly improved in recent years.

We don't pretend to know exactly what the key to success is in the air taxi business. But we suspect it is something like providing as high as humanly possible a standard of safe operations and passenger comfort while at the same time showing a healthy margin of profit in company financial reports. While we have enjoyed safe and comfortable travel in recent years from Metlakatla to Minchumina and Selawik to Savoonga on air taxis and local carriers, there are other trips we'd sooner forget. On some occasions, we have assisted pilots inexperienced in Alaskan flying by pointing out locations of landmarks and cultural features. Pilots are human and are not entirely perfect beings, but there is little excuse for operating poorly maintained aircraft.

Recently, at an airport which serves one of the rural regions and experiences heavy bush aircraft traffic, we observed an airplane landing in the dark, low overcast and light snow with improper lighting. Traffic in the vicinity of the airport was heavy. Although our airplane had take-off clearance, we decided to wait an additional moment or two even though we could not observe any other aircraft on final approach. Suddenly, out of the darkness, an airplane touched down in front of us on the runway. It had no landing lights, no beacon, and no lighting other than a green light on its right wingtip. The airplane was operated by an air taxi service on a scheduled Wien Air Alaska bush flight under an agreement approved by the Civil Aeronautics Board. Under such circumstances, it would seem as though the Federal Government has fully investigated the operation and guarantees to the traveling public that the service provided is as safe and reliable as humanly possible. So it would seem.

We have questioned for some time the advisability of allowing a major regional carrier, possessing a system-wide capability of proper aircraft maintenance and operation, to turn over its bush schedules to smaller local carriers and air taxi services which operate with uncertain maintenance programs and a high turnover among their pilots. There are many air taxi operators and local carriers who take the care and expense to hire experienced pilots and make a substantial investment in properly equipped aircraft and quality maintenance programs. While we do not agree with the argument that bush operations are unprofitable, if the Feds are going to let regional carriers turn over bush schedules to air taxis and local carriers, then the Feds had ought to make sure that the outfits operating the bush schedules provide the same degree of safe and reliable service as passengers have come to expect on any scheduled flight subject to Federal regulation anywhere in the country.

While we consider that the Feds have an obligation to do everything within their authority to ensure the safest possible air travel in rural Alaska, all of us, as passengers and consumers, should do our best also to help improve the situation. The next time we observe questionable pilot performance or operation of improperly maintained aircraft, the officials concerned with air safety in Alaska should be informed. By the same token, the good guys who make the extra effort for safe and comfortable air travel should also be recognized.

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The following are the addresses for the Civil Aeronautics Board, the Alaska Transportation Commission, the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board. The next time you have a serious question about air safety in the bush, write them a letter, and please send us a copy.

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