

The Manager's Approach



Vol. 7 Issue 6/7

Columbia & Pine Mountain Lake Airports

June/July, 2008

Thank You Volunteers

I would like to thank all the people that volunteered to help out at the Father's Day Fly-In and the Pine Mountain Lake Airport Day. Both events were great successes.

New REILs At Columbia

Believe it or not the REILs (Runway End Identification Lights) at Columbia Airport are owned and operated by the FAA. The REILs are the strobe lights at the threshold of Runways 17 and 35. They are the only system on our airport that the FAA has the responsibility to operate and maintain. Two years ago the REILs at the threshold of Runway 35 were upgraded to the latest modern design. In July, the FAA is upgrading the REILs on Runway 17 to an even more modern design. The change is necessitated by the fact that there are no replacement parts for the old system. Installing the new lights should take just a few days and they should be fully operational by the end of the month.

New AWOS for Columbia Airport Ordered

Columbia Airport has obtained an FAA Airport Improvement Grant to upgrade the Automatic Weather Observing System. Many of our local pilots know how unreliable the old system has become and that it has been very expensive to maintain and calibrate. The reason the maintenance costs have been so high is that the system is very old and no replacement parts are available for it. When a sensor breaks the

sensor must be removed and sent out for repair.

The new AWOS will be manufactured and installed by All Weather, Inc. and it will include all new sensors, computer, radio and an internet interface. Soon, you will be able to log on to a computer and obtain Columbia's weather data. This is going to make our AWOS information available to many more pilots and County citizens.

It is expected that the new system will take about 12 to 14 weeks to fabricate and install so we can look for the new system to be up and running around the end of October.

The FAA grant also includes the purchase of a replacement Density Altitude Display. The old display broke and spare and replacement parts were unavailable. The new display will be all electronic with LED lights and powered by a solar panel. Being solar powered, the new DAD does not have to be located where there is electrical power. My plan is to install the DAD up by the run-up area at Runway 17 where it will be visible to pilots just before their take off.

Hangar Construction

The selected hangar developer, Gold Country Hangars has recently held meetings with the Airport Department, PG&E, the Building Department, the Fire Marshal, the engineer and the surveyor. The preliminary design of the hangars is being firmed up so that construction plans can be submitted to the County for review and approval.

The developer has also obtained a copy of both the Columbia and Pine Mountain Lake Airports Hangar Waiting Lists. It is his plan to send out a questionnaire to everyone on

the waiting lists to obtain feedback on individual needs/desires for hangar size and amenities.

Most pilots have had been waiting for years for a hangar. Responding to the questionnaire is their opportunity to communicate directly with the developer to express their interest in a new hangar and to provide the developer with input as to what amenities should be included in the new buildings.

Stupid Pilot Tricks

Wildfire Near Columbia Airport

We recently had a medium size wildfire located only four miles south of Columbia Airport. CAL FIRE was concerned that the fire, if not contained, could destroy numerous structures in the area. To contain the fire, CAL FIRE called in aerial reinforcements, which resulted in six air tankers, four helicopters and two C-130 Hercules aircraft fighting the fire. It seemed there was an air tanker taking off or landing every two or three minutes.

The Tanker Base called my office and asked if I would put an announcement on the AWOS informing pilots of the close proximity of the fire and the heavy volume of fire fighting aircraft traffic. My recorded announcement included a statement that fire fighting aircraft have both priority and the right-of-way. It also suggested approaching Columbia Airport from the east and to use left traffic for Runway 17 to keep arriving and departing traffic away from the fire and the air tankers flying left traffic for Runway 35.

While monitoring the radio I did notice that most of the pilots complied with the AWOS announcement. However, there was one pilot that called up 10 miles west, inbound for right traffic for Runway 17 for a touch and go. This guy either didn't listen to the AWOS broadcast or didn't know east from west, right traffic from left traffic or what giving priority and right-of-way to the air tankers meant.

One of the tanker pilots politely told him that there was a fire south of the airport and that there were numerous aircraft working the fire, then asked him his intentions. Our visiting pilot then responded after a pause that he would do a full stop landing instead!

To me common sense would suggest that leaving the area would be the best thing to do, especially if the only reason the pilot was flying to Columbia was to do a touch and go landing. He could have gone to Calaveras, Oakdale, or Pine Mountain Lake and done as many touch and goes as he liked without getting in the way of the fire fighting aircraft.

Instead this pilot decided to make a full stop landing which takes more time and puts him on the runway twice, once for landing and once for takeoff. Additionally, he had to coordinate his taxi with the tankers reloading at the tanker base.

Most pilots know to stay away from wildfires. An aerial attack on a wildfire may include an overhead spotter aircraft, air tankers, and helicopters making the skies pretty crowded. An intruder into the area only complicates their job. When a wild fire is near an airport, especially one with a tanker base, the airspace can get pretty small. Tuolumne County has an ordinance that gives fire fighting aircraft the right of way and I presume that many other counties have a similar ordinance. If you find yourself headed to an airport that is involved with a wildfire air attack, consider flying to an alternate airport for the safety of yourself and our fire fighters in the air.

The Manager's Approach is a monthly publication from the Tuolumne County Airports Director for the purpose of keeping our community informed of local aviation and airport issues. You can contact me at:

Tuolumne County Airports Department
Jim Thomas, Airports Director
10723 Airport Road, Columbia, CA 95310
209-533-5685
jthomas@co.tuolumne.ca.us