

The Manager's Approach



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Columbia & Pine Mountain Lake Airports

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Weather Information

Aviation weather information used to be hard to obtain. The only reliable information was from a pilots briefing through a Flight Service Station, which was only an interpretation of a whole bunch of individual pieces of data. However, with the development of satellite imaging, NEXRAD radar, inexpensive computing power, the internet, and cell phones, weather data is readily available to all pilots in many forms.

My main source of weather information is through the internet which has a multitude of weather information sites. With the upgrade of the Columbia Airport AWOS to include a NADIN connection our AWOS weather data is available in the form of a METAR on several flight-planning websites. It is also available through the Aviation Digital Data System (ADDS) by going to the METAR tab and typing in KO22 for the airport identifier. Please note that a "K" is required in front of O22 to meet the ICAO identification standard. Numerous, but not all flight aviation weather sites have our METAR data.

Our AWOS information can also be accessed directly over the internet at <http://awos.co.tuolumne.ca.us> which will display the current weather data plus the wind direction in graphical form with respect to Runway 17-35. If you have a cell phone available you can call the Columbia AWOS by dialing 209-536-9384.

Another very useful weather tool is the webcams that provide current pictures of the weather at our airports. At Columbia Airport there are four cameras that were installed by our local EAA Chapter 1337 with an internet link provided by Aero

Resources. Each of the four cameras points a different direction so you can see the weather to the north, south, east and west. The images from these cameras can be viewed through links at www.eaa1337.org, and www.aero-resources.com. Pine Mountain Lake Airport has a webcam hosted by the Wallace Company. This camera points south west and can be found at www.wallacecompany.com. The Pine Mountain Lake Aviation Association website has links to both airport webcams.

It is becoming more commonplace to also have weather available in the aircraft through WSI or XM weather broadcasts. The Columbia Airport METAR is available through these services, too.

With today's connectivity all pilots should have near real-time weather at their finger tips. Being familiar with the current weather conditions at your airport of departure, enroute, and at your destination will make for a much safer and less stressful flight.

2009 Airport Improvement Projects

Everyone knows that both the federal and state governments are financially stressed. As a result of the trickle down process, the FAA has only authorized 33% of the annual \$150,000 Airport Improvement Program (AIP) entitlement grant money for small general aviation airports. Simply put, we have only been authorized to apply for a maximum of \$50,000 so far this year. I'm sure most people know that \$50,000 does not go very far when it comes to constructing airport improvements. As a result, I have informed the FAA that Columbia Airport would like to "carry-over"

all of our 2009 entitlement money into 2010. If the remaining 2009 money gets authorized and we are authorized the full \$150,000 in 2010 we should have \$300,000 available for federally funded airport improvements in 2010.

This said, the FAA will most likely receive a significant amount of “economic stimulus” money when the economic stimulus bill finally becomes law. Rumors are that the FAA will receive around \$3 billion for distribution to airports for airport improvements. The FAA will distribute this money through their AIP program which will still require that each airport receiving stimulus money meet the standard grant assurances. Unfortunately, this will prevent Pine Mountain Lake Airport from receiving any of the stimulus money.

The stimulus money will be available for airport improvement projects that can be quickly implemented. At this time there is one project at Columbia Airport that is designed which is the fire protection line that will extend along South Airport Road. If things work out, we may be able to construct this fire protection line with stimulus money and save our entitlement money for other needed projects.

Noise Sensitive Areas

As a reminder to our local pilots, we have several noise sensitive areas near our airports. Maps showing these areas are posted at both airports. Please be neighborly and avoid these areas.

Stupid Pilot Tricks

Where is that Runway?

It is not too often that Columbia or Pine Mountain Lake Airports have poor weather, but on those few days that we do have poor weather, most pilots choose not to fly. However, every once in a while I'll be at the airport and see someone “sneak” in by flying just below the cloud layer. Is this safe or legal? I discussed this with a local CFI to get clarification of what the FARs require

when the ceiling and visibility are low. Here is what I was told. Our airports are surrounded by Class E airspace down to 700' AGL. Below 700' is Class G airspace. In Class E we need to stay 500' below the bottom of the clouds and have 3 miles visibility. But, in Class G we only have to be clear of clouds with 1 mile of visibility. So legally you can fly into and out of our airports as long as the visibility is greater than 1 mile, you are clear of clouds and you are below 700' AGL.

The real issue is whether you can fly in this kind of weather safely. I think the answer to this is it depends on the pilot's capabilities, his knowledge of the local terrain and the speed of his aircraft. An experienced local pilot flying a slow aircraft should be able to handle this kind of weather, but an inexperienced pilot, based at another airport flying a higher speed aircraft could get into trouble quickly.

One thing to consider is that when the weather sets in, more pilots will be using the GPS approaches. Their decision height is approximately 700' AGL. So, a VFR pilot could be legally flying just below the clouds and a plane on the GPS approach could pop out of the clouds looking for the runway. This potential conflict makes proper use of the radio the only way to tell if there are both VFR and IFR traffic in the pattern.

Whether you are flying VFR or IFR, check the weather; know your capabilities, and the limitations of your aircraft. Be on alert for other aircraft operating at the airport by using your radio and looking for traffic. Don't do anything foolish which might impact the good reputation of our airports.

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:

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