The Manager's Approach

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Local TFRs

The Columbia Airport Community has been saddened with the death of one of the firefighters that was based at the Columbia Air Attack Base. The normal energetic, vocal twenty-something firefighters quietly sat around the airport yesterday reflecting on the death of one of their own. Fighting wildfires is dangerous business, whether you are on the ground clearing a firebreak or flying an air tanker or a helicopter.

Most of our local pilots probably never knew that a TFR was established during the Tuolumne River fire that included the east edge of the Pine Mountain Lake Airport. This was a 7 nautical mile radius zone centered over the fire and included all airspace from the surface to 10,000'. Rancho Muritea Flight Service phoned my office to inform me of the TFR after which I immediately printed out both a graphic and the text description of the TFR and had it posted at the PML gas pump and in the window at the pilot's lounge. I also called some local PML pilots and asked them to spread the word. One thing I don't want to see is a pilot get busted for flying inside a TFR and the last thing I want to have happen is a "close encounter" between the air attack aircraft and a GA pilot.

Although wildfire TFRs don't seem as onerous as a VIP TFR, they still are restricted airspace and you can get busted for flying through them. All that is needed is for one of the air attack pilots to get your N-number and report it. If that happens, you most likely will get a call from the FAA and you could face a 120-day license suspension.

If you are not in the habit of checking for TFRs, you should at least understand that where there is smoke "there most likely is a TFR" when air attack aircraft are being used to fight the fire, which is almost always. Now days, the CDF launches aircraft at the first notification of a fire and then decides whether to use them or not once the aircraft are on the scene. Their rapid response has prevented many small fires from becoming major disasters.

When you see a big plume of smoke, adjust your course if necessary to stay at least 10 miles away from the fire. Look for and avoid fire-fighting aircraft flying between the local airports and the fire. If the plume is small and looks like a fire may have just started, get on the radio and call Flight Service. They will let you know if the fire has been reported and will also tell you if a TFR has been established. Early warning is important. So is keeping clear of a fire when an air attack is in progress.

This article also appears in the Pine Mountain Lake Aviation Association Newsletter. I am also publishing it in my Manager's Approach because this is an important safety issue that all local pilots need to be aware of.

New Hangar Issues

I have said from the day I started my job as Airports Director that I am very interested in getting new hangars built at both airports. My desire has not changed, but my awareness of the issues delaying new hangar construction has increased significantly. The biggest hang-up at both airports is water for fire protection. The 2002 Fire Code set

up a new classification for aircraft hangars that requires hangars less than 5,000 square feet to have a fire hydrant that flows 1,500 gallons per minute within 300' of all parts of the structure. If the hangar building is greater than 5,000 square feet or if the required 1,500 gallons per minute cannot be obtained, then the structure must have a sprinkler system installed.

Guess what? Neither Columbia nor PML have the needed 1,500 gallons per minute fire flow. Unless things change, this means that all new hangars must have sprinkler systems installed. I am currently working with TUD and will be working with GCSD to identify what steps must be taken to get the waterlines extended. This includes the challenge of financing the waterline extensions, which may come in the form of FAA grants, the sale of airport assets and/or hangar developer funding.

Stupid Pilot Tricks

Earlier this month we had a day of gusty winds from the north. The Columbia AWOS was calling out "wind 290 at 16 knots gusting to 23 knots". On days like this the local pilots drop what they are doing and stand facing the runway to watch pilots try to gracefully plant their aircraft on the runway.

I watched several pilots go-around when they couldn't keep their aircraft lined up with the runway then return to make a "good landing in which the aircraft was still in airworthy condition". One non-local pilot attempted a landing on 35 but executed an ugly go-around when the gusts tossed his 2-place trainer into unusual attitudes. I got on the radio and suggested that he land 29 because the wind was right down the runway. The pilot switched runways and made a beautiful landing on the grass. I felt good that I helped the pilot get on the ground safely and hoped he learned the lesson that there are more runways on an airport besides the paved ones.

This pilot spent about 45 minutes on the ground, probably walking into Columbia for a sandwich. Upon his return he got in his airplane and taxied to runway 17! Keep in mind the winds hadn't changed during his lunch break. During his take-off he struggled about 20' into the air with a direct right crosswind then dropped like a rock bouncing off the runway before proceeding off to the south. Obviously, this pilot needs some additional training in runway selection during windy conditions.

Not to be outdone, another pilot a little later in the day did a one-wheel landing on 17 followed by a roll-out on 29, the first dual runway landing I have ever seen! Fortunately for him, his left wingtip never touched the asphalt and fortunately for us he missed one of the landing lights by inches.

If you want to see some interesting wheel marks, go out to the segmented circle and check out the C-182 wheel tracks that go right between the windsock and tetrahedron!

What is the lesson here? Listen to the AWOS and really visualize the winds and the available runway headings. Look at the airport diagram and figure out which runway is best for those conditions. Look at the windsock and the tetrahedron to verify the wind direction. Know the crosswind limitations of your plane. Know your own crosswind limitations. Get everything going in your favor before you attempt your landing. If you don't there will be lots of pilots on the ground being entertained by your stupidity.

Stupid Pilot Tricks is a monthly article that attempts to raise awareness of safety and courtesy issues around 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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