

The Manager's Approach



Vol. 11 Issue 3

Columbia & Pine Mountain Lake Airports

August, 2012

Fire Fighting Activity

Tuolumne County has been a busy place for fire fighters this summer. The CAL FIRE Air Attack Base at Columbia has been especially busy for a couple of reasons; first this has been a particularly active fire season, and second, CAL FIRE is not basing any air tankers at Fresno Airport this year so the Columbia Airport based air tankers are covering the Fresno area. The air tankers launch several times a day during fire season.

I'm sure most local pilots were aware of the Temporary Flight Restrictions (TFR) placed adjacent to the Pine Mountain Lake Airport at the end of July to provide a safe environment for aircraft fighting the Graham Fire which was located less than 2 miles north of the Pine Mountain Lake Airport. This TFR was specifically shaped to allow the airport to remain open while the fire fighting was active. This fire and TFR is a perfect example of why pilots need to check for TFRs before flying. No one wants to have a close encounter with a fire fighting helicopter or an air tanker, especially when they are working hard to prevent a fire from destroying life or property.

I happen to be on vacation at the time the Graham Fire was active but I did fly home shortly after it was extinguished. Prior to flying home I checked the FAA TFR website (<http://tfr.faa.gov/tfr2/list.html>) and also filed a flight plan with the FAA. During my briefing I specifically inquired about a TFR at the Pine Mountain Lake Airport and was told it had been cancelled. However, when I was flying in I noticed that my Sirius XM Weather showed the TFR still active. The TFR appeared on my screen the next day, too so I pulled up the FAA TFR website again and reconfirmed the cancellation of the TFR. I also talked to the

Air Attack pilot that filed the TFR and he confirmed that he had cancelled the TFR. The lesson learned here is that not all information regarding TFRs is accurate. Just because a TFR shows up on your display does not mean it is active. Conversely, just because a TFR doesn't show up on your display, doesn't mean that there isn't a TFR that has been issued.

Lastly, all pilots should know that fire fighting aircraft are considered emergency service aircraft and have the right-of-way.

What is an Air Attack Aircraft?

The term "air attack" may not be clearly understood by many pilots so I thought I would try and clarify what it means.

At Columbia Airport "air attack" refers to the aircraft (usually in a fixed-wing aircraft) that carries the supervisor who oversees the process of attacking a wildfire from the air. The primary aircraft used by CAL FIRE is the OV-10 Bronco.



Residential Through-The-Fence Update

I know that Tuolumne County Airports would love to resolve the Residential Through-The-Fence (RTTF) issue that has plagued the Pine Mountain Lake Airport for

many years. This is going to be a very brief update on this issue.

On March 8, 2011 the FAA published its interim policy on RTTF, but then on February 14, 2012 congress passed the FAA Modernization and Reform Act which contained RTTF provisions contradicting the existing FAA policy. On July 30, 2012 the FAA issued a DRAFT Compliance Guidance Letter which contained proposed FAA policy on the RTTF issue. The DRAFT was issued so the FAA could obtain comments regarding its proposed policy. No one can say when the comments will be reviewed and when their final policy will be issued. This leaves the County in limbo because it is unknown what the final FAA policy will require. Tuolumne County, just like all other airport sponsors with RTTF airports, is in a position where it can only wait for the definitive policy to be issued by the FAA.

Stay Away From My Rotor Wash!



Stupid Pilot Tricks

Yielding the Right-of-Way

I often have a radio tuned to the Columbia Airport CTAF while sitting at my desk. This is especially true during fire season when there is an increase in aircraft activity. Recently, I heard a pilot report a five-mile final for Runway 17 immediately followed by an air tanker pilot announcing that Tanker 82, Tanker 83, and Air Attack 440 were going to depart Runway 17 on a fire dispatch after the landing traffic was on the ground. All pilots should know that landing

aircraft have the right-of-way over departing aircraft and I expect this is why the fire fighting aircraft said they would hold their departure until the landing aircraft had cleared the runway. However, emergency service aircraft also have the right-of-way. In this case I feel the inbound aircraft should have yielded the right-of-way to the firefighting aircraft by simply making a 360 degree turn, allowing the air tankers and air attack aircraft time to depart.

This particular pilot was not a local pilot and I expect that he had never been to an airport with operating fire fighting aircraft. He heard the announcement that the air tankers and air attack aircraft would wait for him to land so he continued his approach.



Pilots should understand that when responding to a fire dispatch, time is of the essence so please yield the right-of-way to all fire fighting aircraft whether they are an air tanker, an air attack or helicopter.

The Manager's Approach is published by the Tuolumne County Airports Manager for the purpose of keeping our community informed of local aviation and airport issues.

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

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.