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Cassandra Isackson, Director

Dan McDowell, Editor

Minnesota DOT Office of Aeronautics
222 East Plato Boulevard • St. Paul, MN 55107-1618
651-234-7200 or (toll free) 1-800-657-3922

The Minnesota Airports Conference, AirVenture & NOTAMS

by *Cassandra Isackson*

Director, Minnesota DOT Office of Aeronautics

Spring is here and we are working hard to prepare to participate in a number of outstanding aviation events for the spring-summer season. Here are a couple terrific events that I want to remind you of and let you know your Office of Aeronautics will be there, where we hope to meet many of you:



Cassandra Isackson

Minnesota Airports Conference

April 24-26, you will have an opportunity to hear industry and government officials' ideas and information on funding, aviation trends, airport management, operations, maintenance, and best practices at the annual Minnesota Airports Conference to be held this year at the Willmar Conference Center, 240 23rd Street SE, Willmar, Minnesota. The annual Minnesota Airports Conference features experts in aviation and aerospace, sharing their experiences in general assembly presentations, workshops, and open forums. The conference, held in conjunction with the Minnesota Council of Airports' annual meeting, also includes technical and safety presentations, an industry trade show, and an awards and recognition program. Oh, by the way, the keynote speaker for

this event will be none-other than Vikings player and private pilot, Harrison Smith!

EAA AirVenture Oshkosh

EAA AirVenture Oshkosh will be held July 22-28 in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Come see us at the world's greatest general aviation event and gathering. Be a part of the excitement and fun, while exploring the flight lines and parking areas to visit many thousands of unique and beautiful aircraft. Don't forget to visit the vendors and stop by our booth, too. We'll be there to answer questions and share information about aviation in Minnesota. Come get your fly in "Minnesota Passport." You'll be glad you did.

NOTAMS

I want to encourage you to read the article by Kelly Akhund in this edition of our "Aeronautics Bulletin." Kelly discusses how NOTAMs can affect safety, what pilots can do to help their airport manager provide timely NOTAMs, and risk mitigation. The article is very important to aviation safety and every pilot should make a point to read it.

Remember, as pilot-in-command, you are directly responsible for, and you are the final authority as to, the operation of your aircraft. So be safe. Attend safety seminars often. Enjoy flying in Minnesota. □

No NOTAM does not mean no hazard!

by *Kelly Akhund*

Aviation Representative/Pilot, MnDOT Aeronautics

Pilots Rely On NOTAMs

Runway closures, navaid outages, contaminated surfaces, poor braking action; these are all potential hazards that could affect the safety at an airport. Some hazards are predictable and some happen at the last



Kelly Akhund

minute. Either way, airports need to let pilots know about them. Pilots rely on an alerting system called Notices to Airmen (NOTAMs), which allows airports to inform them of these types of hazardous situations. It's a requirement that pilots read NOTAMs before every flight. But,

what happens if airports aren't reporting?

When you think of a large airport with air traffic control, like Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport, one can assume it is constantly being monitored. Someone is there watching the condition of the runways around the clock, ensuring that the appropriate crews are dispatched if snow removal is needed, and NOTAMs are being reported. What about the small airports...the ones that don't have a fixed base operator (FBO) or line service workers to greet you? You know, those airports where you have to pump your own fuel. Who is reporting the conditions at those airports?

All airports have an assigned airport manager. Some airport managers' jobs are to be just that, an airport manager. Their responsibilities are strictly to look after an airport and they typically have an aviation background. However, managers at some smaller airports have other, sometimes multiple other job duties within their municipality. It's possible that when they took their job, they didn't know they were also going to be an airport manager. It was another responsibility added onto their long lists of tasks. These types of airport managers might not be pilots, or have had any familiarity with aviation before being assigned this new job title. Don't get me wrong...these folks work long and hard hours for their municipality. Yet, the bottom line is, their focus is divided and it's impossible to devote 100% of their time to the airport.

That Could Affect Safety!

That said, what happens when an ice storm hits and the airport manager is in another part of the city focusing on down trees that are blocking a street? They probably aren't thinking about reporting poor runway conditions through the NOTAM system. This is a problem for pilots.

Before every flight, pilots go into data collection mode to make an informed go/no-go decision. If there is no data provided to them about the airport they are flying to, they are being denied very important information that could affect (their) safety. A piece of information, such as poor braking action from an ice storm, could potentially change the outcome of a flight.

Knowing the actual runway conditions without a NOTAM is a challenge because pilots might not get a good look at the runway until seconds before touchdown. Night, and low visibility conditions, will decrease that amount of time even further. Sometimes just looking at a runway can't provide the information needed about whether it's safe to land or not. Not being provided this information through a NOTAM, some pilots might even assume the runway condition is good. Maybe they'll think the airport manager has already removed any contaminants from the ice storm. Bad assumption!

Another problem is that some of these NOTAMs only last for a few hours and have to be reinstated, even if conditions

don't change. And even if an airport manager has time to report the conditions the first time around, will they continue to update the NOTAM?

What Can Pilots Do?

So, you ask, what can pilots do about this? There are a few things you can do to find out what the actual conditions are at every airport you fly to, no matter how large or small, or how well monitored the airport is.

The first thing is, if no NOTAMs are reported, don't assume conditions are good! Call and ask about the field conditions. For every airport listed in the FAA Chart Supplement (aka: Airport Facility Directory), there is a phone number listed for the airport manager. If you can't get in touch with the airport manager, call the local law enforcement agency.

Have a phone call be a part of your preflight data collection. That way you can get someone to physically go out to the airport and provide you with real-time information. If you don't speak with someone, you also might not know until it's too late that the fuel system is not operating. This is relevant information, especially if you are only able to bring enough fuel to get to your destination and not back home. If there is no NOTAM, a quick phone call could prevent you from being stuck!

In addition to your destination airport's NOTAMs, look at what the surrounding airports are reporting. Those airport managers might have been out looking at their airport more recently and could be reporting current information. It's likely that the airport you're going to will have similar surface conditions.

Another tool that can be helpful is on the FAA NOTAM search website*. There is a dropdown menu option that allows you to do an archive search for past NOTAMs. It will display NOTAMs that were previously active and have expired. This tool can help you review trending information about a specific airport.

Risk Mitigation!

Every flight has its risks, but here in the Midwest, winter weather conditions can significantly increase the risk level. Most pilots have some sort of process to assess risks during the planning phase of their flight, and can decide if the risk level is acceptable to fly. However, if pilots are not able to assess all risks associated with a flight *due to lack of information*, they could unintentionally make a poor decision and fly when it is not safe! If there are no NOTAMs reported at an airport, remember, it does not necessarily mean that conditions are good. In the absence of current NOTAMs, it might be a good idea to call the airport ahead of your flight and make safety your first priority!

* <https://notams.aim.faa.gov/notamSearch/>

