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Risk Management

Select and Use Conventional and Unconventional Personal Minimums

The use of a Personal Minimums Checklist is one method for identifying and managing risks when you fly. It's an excellent starting point for considering risks, especially for low-time pilots. If you have thousands of hours of experience, it's possible you didn't learn about Personal Minimums when you got your license years ago. To have survived this long, however, you have probably developed your own routine for managing risk, or have just been lucky. Rather than waiting for the luck to run out, take the time now to develop your own Personal Minimums.

First, print a copy of the FAA's Accident Prevention Brochure P-8740-56, called "Personal Minimums Checklist." Then spend some quiet time reading through the four categories of Pilot, Aircraft, Environment, and External Pressures and decide on the minimums that you'll use to guide your decision making for every flight. Think of it as a way to not only preflight the airplane, but also to preflight the pilot and other risk factors.

In the Pilot category, you might set the minimum number of hours of sleep that you'll always require before making a flight. In the Aircraft category, you might set your minimum fuel reserves at 1 hour in the daytime and 1-1/2 hours at night. That is double the legal minimums but, when you consider that 11 percent of accidents are fuel related and mostly preventable, it makes sense to carry extra fuel.

In the Environment category, you might choose to fly with at least 5 or 6 miles of visibility in the daytime, which, again, is double the legal minimum visibility of 3 miles. Or, although it is legal to take off IFR with zero visibility, you might decide to always require a ceiling and visibility that allow you to return IFR to your departure airport if you encounter a problem after takeoff.

Also, consider unconventional minimums that you will not find on the list. For example, because most night accidents occur when the moon is not in the sky or it is obscured by clouds, you might decide to not fly at night, unless at least a quarter moon is visible. Or, because fatigue is an accident factor, you might decide never to fly after 11 p.m., or after you've had a combined workday and flying time of, for example, 10 hours. Be creative in selecting personal minimums that fit your knowledge of yourself and known accident factors. Then, never violate the minimums you have established, regardless of the internal or external pressures you may experience to complete a flight.

The FAASTeam has asked Max Trescott, the 2008 National CFI of the Year, to write a series of safety tips. Max, a San Francisco area-based Master CFI, specializes in teaching in and publishing training materials for glass cockpit aircraft. You can read more of his work at www.maxtrescott.com and www.g1000book.com or e-mail him at info@sjflight.com.