

MENTOR

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position Report

The State of Flight Training

The state of the flight-training industry is: unhealthy. It is the time of the year in which we have just heard the president talk about the state of the Union; I think we should also talk about our industry.

As I write these words, I can't help but think, "Who am I to tell the flight-training industry about itself?" There are others who are probably also qualified to make similar statements, but I feel OK doing so since I work in this industry every day, talking often with flight-training providers who are individual instructors, at local FBOs and all the way to collegiate/university and academy training environments. I see the broad path of this industry, and I am concerned.

The flight-training industry is facing pressures like it has never faced before. An unstable regulatory environment has left the industry unsure regarding even what basic requirements may be required of a pilot (who they intend to train) to work in an airline environment. Financing for non-collegiate/university program training has virtually dried up, leaving customers forced with a pay-as-you-go or pay-ahead approach to training. Many customers cannot afford this approach to a career. A large number of smaller, FBO-type providers of services including aircraft rental and training have closed.

In mid-January, a representative of the Obama administration indicated that a fee of \$100 per flight in controlled airspace was an equitable level that aviation should accept as its role in keeping the federal aviation system funded. OK, beyond my initial shock, I thought we paid in aviation fuel taxes for that (let's not get started on asking where that money has gone). My next thought was about how many major flight-training providers were at controlled airports. The effect of a charge such as this would be staggering. I

expect the significant increase in cost that this would cause would dry up any potential student market in these locations.

The United States has been a leader in aviation for a long time. A part of this has been leadership in providing flight training. Significant numbers of students from all around the world come to the United States every year and receive flight training from U.S. flight-training providers and professionals because we do it better, in a competitive manner related to cost, and because our regulatory environment is open to safe but easily accessible training. If our nation continues with policies that hinder the ability of this profession, the U.S. will no longer be the leader, and business will go elsewhere. If we think that there aren't other places working to take this international business away from the U.S., shame on us for putting our heads in the sand, and we have no right to complain when it is gone.

Our industry needs to get tough, lean and active. The days of just hoping students will show up at our door are gone. We can't keep "hoping" that things will get better. Flight instructors who are going to be active need to talk with their local, state and federal elected officials to impress on them how important the business of flight training is to their communities and the nation. We need as a group to strengthen our business models. If our business models become profitable and strong, we may make it so that in the future, banking institutions can again consider funding of flight-training efforts a reasonable risk for customers' financing; right now they can't because our track record as an industry has burned them too many times.

This is no time to sit back. Our industry is not healthy, it is in a precarious position, and if we don't do something about



Jason Blair, NAFI MCFI
Executive Director

This is no time to sit back. Our industry is not healthy, it is in a precarious position, and if we don't do something about it, it will continue to contract and decay.

it, it will continue to contract and decay. I know this sounds bleak, but it doesn't have to be. You reading this can be a personal turning point—the point at which you begin to help all of us build toward a more effective tomorrow in the flight-training industry.

What can we do about it? This is where I challenge you to talk with your local, state and federal officials. Educate them about our industry and help them understand what their actions or non-actions will do to our ability to train pilots in the United States. Call your local officials and talk about it. It is their job to represent their constituents; pilots and the businesses that train pilots are exactly that, constituents.