



PRESIDENTIAL ADVANCE TEAM MISSED THE MARK ON ALASKA AVIATION

News / Airlines



Confusion over the potential airspace restrictions during the President's upcoming visit has presented a case study in how little understood Alaska's aviation environment remains to many in the Lower 48.

With little information coming from official sources at first, rumors about what might happen reverberated through Alaska's aviation community, [fueling worries](#) over how businesses and long-planned trips could be affected.

And when more detailed information on the [Temporary Flight Restrictions](#) was released Wednesday, those worries turned to disappointment for many pilots and charter companies. This was in large part because it was decided that [Palmer Airport would serve as a security checkpoint](#), or "gateway airport" for all incoming chartered aircraft and general aviation to Ted Stevens International, Merrill Field and Lake Hood Seaplane Base for large periods of Aug. 31 and Sept. 1.

Palmer has no floatplane access, which meant that although floatplanes could get out of Lake Hood after going through security, they couldn't get back in.

While everyone expected limitations and adjustments, no one thought floatplane operations at

Lake Hood would be essentially shut down, especially during hunting season. It seemed too outrageous to be true.

But that's where we were until Friday when another [TFR for Anchorage](#) was released [opening up Wasilla Lake as a floatplane gateway](#). Companies that were cancelling customers days ago are now scrambling to reschedule with what they hope -- finally -- will be the last airspace change.

From the initial restrictions that completely prohibited floatplane operations, to the TFR which assigned the Palmer gateway (failing to provide for floatplane access), to the latest TFR which opens up Wasilla Lake, this entire experience has been characterized by an enormous amount of unnecessary confusion and a clear lack of understanding about Alaska aviation and the many unique moments that occur within it on a daily basis.

One year, the Fairbanks company I worked for flew a group of hunters from Kentucky who had saved for years to have their Alaska dream trip. We filled up one Piper Navajo with them and most of their gear and had a second aircraft for their dozen purebred Kentucky bloodhounds. Standing on the ramp that morning, while those dogs howled for all they were worth, I knew I was seeing something equal parts crazy and fantastic.

Charters like that one comprise a significant portion of commercial aviation in the state including flying everyone from the obvious tourists such as hunters and fishermen, to dog mushers, school teams, surveyors, geologists, biologists, volcanologists, miners, climbers, rafters and on and on. Chartering a small aircraft for work or pleasure, hauling passengers, cargo, the living or the dead, is common in Alaska and arrangements are made weeks, if not months, in advance. Starting with flying's earliest days in the Last Frontier, charters have been just as significant to the aviation industry as scheduled flights and for all that these customers are often the source of many colorful stories, they reveal a deeper significance: People spend a lot of money for a lot of reasons to fly here.

And while this is true across the state, it is particularly so in Lake Hood.

According to [a 2013 economic study](#), the summer and specifically June, is the busiest time of the year at Lake Hood. June 2012 for example saw an average of 439 daily flight operations. Of the 23,200 out-of-state residents who purchased flight seeing tours in Anchorage between May 2011 and April 2012, the majority were flown by Lake Hood commercial operators. The base is so in-demand for commercial and private flying that there is currently a 10-year waiting list for a slip on the lake.

When we say Lake Hood is the busiest floatplane base in the world, it is not hyperbole. And the statistics which back that statement up, and what they mean to the Anchorage economy, are not the sort that can be ignored. This makes it all the more perplexing that the TFRs could be so far off the mark. Even a limited opening in the evening, so charter operators could return and be security checked at Lake Hood, would make all the difference.

The most cursory study of Anchorage aviation, or discussion with local user groups, industry leaders or FAA officials, would have revealed the devastation that restrictions on floatplane traffic would wreak on the local community.

It is not politics that failed here, but people tasked with the job of thoroughly understanding the aviation environment in which they were operating as they worked to establish security. While it is good for all involved that a workable solution was finally set, it should never have taken this long. It is disappointing that the officials charged with coordinating the president's visit chose not to

engage in necessary conversations weeks ago or recognize, that even in the 21st century, aviation in Alaska is still vastly different from everywhere else in America.

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