

Tom Poberezny, President, EAA

General Aviation United

Countering the airlines' call for GA user fees

User fees are a perennial challenge that general aviation (GA) must address if we are to preserve the freedom and opportunities personal flight offers. Because GA has successfully defended its position and equitable contribution to the aviation infrastructure through fuel taxes, some may be unconcerned about the current call for fees, perhaps thinking, "We've stopped them before, so we'll stop them again."

But this time is different. Speaking through its lobbying group, the Air Transport Association, the financially challenged airlines have mounted a united effort to expand their influence over air traffic operations and systems while shifting the economic responsibilities to general aviation. Their plan is called Smart Skies, and their tactic for success is to divide and conquer.

As defined by the FAA, "general aviation" is all flying that is not commercial (airline or air taxi) or military. In other words, general aviation ranges from light-sport aircraft and the ubiquitous Skyhawk to warbirds and the turbine aircraft that serve the nation's businesses. The airlines' plan separates business aviation from the rest of general aviation and targets it for the brunt of the fees.

General aviation as a whole is united in its opposition of user fees. During AirVenture, I moderated and participated in a user fee discussion that made this clear. On the panel were NBAA President Ed Bolen, GAMA President Peter Bunce, AOPA President Phil Boyer, Cessna President Jack Pelton, and Cirrus Design CEO Alan Klapmeier.

In addition to sending a clear message to all that general aviation stands united, the panel reiterated with examples that general aviation has always "paid its fair share" with fuel taxes. How much fuel a pilot purchases has a strong correlation to the time, distance, and facilities he or she will use. Equally important, the GA fuel taxes are efficiently administered and easily collected; user fees would require a new government bureaucracy to collect them.

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Citing examples of user fees in other nations, where costs have increased and flight activity has decreased, the panel showed that the airlines' scheme reduces financial stability and increases vulnerability. ATC's operating costs remain the same no matter its workload. During poor economic times, when fewer people fly, user fees would have to increase to compensate for reduced number of flight operations. User fees would also open the door to other fees for government services such as filing a flight plan and aircraft certification.

This important debate will intensify in the coming year because the congressional authorization for the current funding system, which includes

GA's fuel taxes, expires on September 30, 2007. Sensing an opportunity to transfer their financial obligations to GA, the airlines are aggressively advocating user fees to fund the system the FAA operates. To meet this challenge we in general aviation must stand united. When the time is right, I will ask that your voice be heard. EAA's government affairs team and I will keep you current on the situation—please be prepared to respond.

A Closing Thought

Many times, people making their first visit to EAA AirVenture express their observations with me. Periodically I like to share their first impressions with you.

Bob Deutsch came to Oshkosh with his team to create AirVenture's Fly-In Movie Theater, thanks to the Ford Motor Company and Eclipse Aviation. Afterward, he wrote, "Your members never ceased to amaze me with their sense of ownership of the event and their sense of community. Never in our 10 years of producing outdoor movie events have we seen a group leave a field so meticulously clean or be so polite. You do have amazing members. At most of our high attendance events, it takes a cleanup staff or volunteers about an hour to clean the field and cart trash. Finally, I extend our recognition to the group of campers behind our screen who became fast friends...they tolerated our hours, screen rigging, late night departure, and fed me a super spaghetti dinner. Maybe the rest of the world can learn something up at AirVenture Oshkosh!"

Bob, you're right. "Oshkosh" is a special place! 