

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Forwarded to:

Honorable J. Lynn Helms
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
Washington, D.C. 20591

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

A-82-30

Takeoff and landing accidents in which the reported ground visibility is below authorized operational meteorological minimums continue to occur too frequently in Part 91 operations although the National Transportation Safety Board raised this subject with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as early as 1969. A recent review of the Safety Board's accident investigation docket for 1979 revealed 19 such cases. In all of the cases, low ceiling was cited as a factor in the accident. In 14 of the 19 cases, fog was the factor which restricted visibility while other meteorological phenomena contributed to restricted visibility in other cases. In 17 of the 19 cases, some form or forms of improper action by the pilot such as "improper IFR [instrument flight rules] operation" or "improper level-off" was determined to be the probable cause of the accident. In one case "airport conditions" was listed as the probable cause, and in one case the cause was undetermined. In four cases the applicable approved weather observations were made at an adjacent airport.

The Safety Board investigated two accidents during an 11-month period involving below-minimum weather conditions at Lakefront Airport, New Orleans, Louisiana, which typify the problem. Both aircraft crashed while conducting instrument landing system (ILS) approaches to runway 18, for which the landing weather minimums are 200-foot ceiling and 1/2-mile visibility.

On February 23, 1980, a Mitsubishi MU-2B-40, N962MA, owned by Proform Inc., of Minneapolis, Minnesota, crashed in Lake Pontchartrain about 400 yards left of the localizer and slightly below the glideslope level. All seven occupants were fatally injured and the aircraft was destroyed. The accident aircraft was the fifth in a loose trail formation of aircraft approaching the airport. The first, second, and fourth aircraft in the formation, a DC-9, a Sabreliner, and a G-1 Gulfstream, respectively, landed. The third aircraft, a G-1 Gulfstream, made a missed approach.

The pilot of the accident aircraft reported to the Lakefront tower and was instructed to report when he passed the Alger Intersection. After the pilot acknowledged the instruction, the Lakefront tower informed the pilot that the weather was well below minimums for the approach. The pilot did not acknowledge the weather transmission and did not report passing the Alger Intersection. Shortly before being vectored by the Lakefront tower for the Lakefront approach, the pilot also failed to acknowledge a weather transmission to him by New Orleans approach control which likewise indicated below minimums conditions.

Five minutes before the crash, the Lakefront tower issued the following weather transmission to the pilots in the Lakefront Airport vicinity: "Attention all aircraft; prevailing visibility at Lakefront now one-quarter mile and appears to be deteriorating." At the time of the transmission, the ceiling was reported as 100 feet indefinite obscured. The probable cause of the accident, as determined by the Safety Board, was: "Pilot-in-command--improper IFR operation" with "weather--low ceiling and fog" as factors.

On January 15, 1981, the pilot of a Piper PA-23-250, N681ZY, was making an ILS approach to runway 18 when the Lakefront tower reported the weather conditions as: "ceiling — 100 feet obscured, visibility — one-eighth of a mile in fog." The pilot acknowledged receipt of the weather report and proceeded with the approach. Shortly afterward, the aircraft crashed in Lake Pontchartrain, about 400 yards from the seawall. The Safety Board has not published a probable cause and contributing factors determination with respect to this accident. However, the similarities between this and the accident of February 23, 1980, at the same location are quite apparent.

As early as November 26, 1969, the Safety Board recommended action to prohibit initiation of approaches in Part 91 operations when the reported visibility is less than the specified landing minimums. This recommended change was incorporated in the FAA's proposed rulemaking NPRM 72-17 issued July 12, 1972. However, the proposed rulemaking was withdrawn by the FAA on December 7, 1975, because of "adverse comments regarding the 'look-see'^{1/} privileges for Part 91 operations." In commenting upon NPRM 72-17, the Safety Board expressed the view that the proposed action prohibiting the initiation of below minimums approaches "would be the most appropriate course of action were it not for serious deficiencies in present weather observing and reporting facilities and services."

On January 8, 1981, the FAA published the "Final Rule on Takeoff and Landing Minimums." It affected Parts 1, 91, and 121, and was described as an action which clarifies the conditions under which a pilot may approach and land at an airport when the weather does not allow the pilot to see the runway until shortly before the landing.

The new rules continue to let pilots, irrespective of their experience, when operating IFR under Part 91 to make takeoffs, approaches, and landings as long as they judge that their flight visibility is not less than the minimums prescribed for the instrument procedure being accomplished. The Safety Board realizes that many airports used for Part 91 operations have no weather information available to the pilot; however, even if a weather report for the airport is available from the U.S. National Weather Service (NWS) or another approved source, the present rule allows Part 91 operators to totally ignore the report in initiating a takeoff or a final approach.

In contrast, the parallel provisions of Part 121 prohibit both takeoff and continuation of a landing approach past the final approach fix or into the final approach segment of an instrument approach procedure unless the NWS, a source approved by the NWS, or a source approved by the FAA Administrator reports the visibility to be equal to or more than the visibility minimums prescribed for that procedure.

There have been significant improvements during the past decade in airport weather observing and reporting facilities and services. Yet, despite these advances and the continuing poor safety record, "look-see" takeoffs and approaches continue to be permitted under 14 CFR 91.116 at airports where weather reports from an approved source are available.

^{1/} "Look-see" is the vernacular term used to describe the condition under which a pilot may continue an approach to minimums to "take a look to see" if he can visually locate the runway and land regardless of reported visibility.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Federal Aviation Administration:

Take action to amend 14 CFR 91.116 to provide that takeoffs cannot be initiated or an approach continued past the final approach fix or into the final approach segment of an instrument approach procedure unless the latest weather report for that airport issued by the U.S. National Weather Service, a source approved by that Service, or a source approved by the Administrator, reports the visibility to be equal to or more than the visibility minimums prescribed for that procedure.
(Class II, Priority Action) (A-82-30)

BURNETT, Chairman, and GOLDMAN and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in this recommendation. McADAMS, Member, did not participate.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Burnett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

By: Jim Burnett
Chairman