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NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20591

SEP 13 1987

Mr. David D. Thomas
Acting Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
Department of Transportation
Washington, D. C. 20590

Dear Mr. Thomas:

The Board is quite concerned about the number of instances in which general aviation pilots take off without a weather briefing and without a flight plan only to encounter weather conditions not suitable for VFR flight.

An examination of the general aviation accident record for the year 1966 reveals that there were 306 accidents in which the pilot did not receive a weather briefing. Fifty-six of these accidents occurred under IFR or below minimum conditions. In 32 of the 56 cases, the relevant weather forecast is known to have been accurate; in 20 cases, the details of the relevant weather forecast were not documented, and in only 4 cases were the weather forecasts optimistic.

In the interest of alerting departing general aviation pilots to the existence of IFR weather in the area and the need for obtaining a weather briefing, several airports in the northeastern United States have adopted a warning device which is comparable, in part, to the rotating airport beacons and which commends itself to more widespread utilization. Specifically, the device is a flashing red light mounted on the top of a sign board which reads: "WHEN RED LIGHT IS FLASHING, THE WEATHER OUTLOOK FOR THIS AREA IS UNFAVORABLE FOR VFR FLIGHT. PLEASE USE THE FAA HOTLINE IN PILOTS LOUNGE FOR PRE-FLIGHT AND WEATHER BRIEFING."

Although such a device is obviously inexpensive to manufacture, install, and operate, there are certain unanswered questions relating to fail-safe operation, and the determination of when the light should be lit and by whom.

The use of dual lights and inspections at frequent intervals should satisfy the fail-safe requirement.

As to the question of responsibility for operation of the light, this should devolve upon the agency taking weather observations at the

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airport involved. Where a Supplementary Airway Weather Reporting Station (SAWRS) is involved, this requirement could be stated in the governmental observing agreement. The agency could use as a basis for its decision the existence of a SIGMET and/or an AIRMET issued by the Weather Bureau, pertaining to any portion of the area within a 100-mile radius of the airport.

It is not possible to predict exactly how many of the pilots involved in the non-briefing accidents summarized above would have sought a briefing had the proposed warning device been employed. It seems quite logical to assume, however, that the number would be quite substantial and that, having received the warning of adverse weather, many of them would have altered their plans.

In view of the above, it is recommended that the installation of such warning devices be encouraged at all airports where official weather observations are taken. A similar letter is being sent to the Administrator of the Environmental Science Services Administration.

Sincerely yours,

Original signed by
Joseph J. O'Connell, Jr.

Joseph J. O'Connell, Jr.
Chairman