

The Manager's Approach



Vol. 7 Issue 8

Columbia & Pine Mountain Lake Airports

August, 2008

Columbia AWOS Out of Service

Last month I mentioned that Columbia Airport had received an AIP grant to upgrade the AWOS. The reason we want to upgrade the AWOS is because the current system has become unreliable and expensive to maintain. Well, I think the existing system has been sensing the end of its useful life and has chosen to give up on its own rather than be forcibly removed from service. A couple of weeks ago the main processor board went out and the system is completely down. I cannot even broadcast a voice remark over the AWOS. A NOTAM has been filed informing pilots that the system is out of service.

We have received a preliminary estimate that it will take four weeks and a couple of thousand dollars to repair the main processor board. There are no off-the-shelf spares for the existing system so the main processor board would have to be removed and sent to a certified facility for repair (if parts can be found).

I've asked All Weather, Inc., the new AWOS manufacturer, if they can expedite the delivery and installation of the new system. All Weather has indicated that they will expedite the new system at no charge to Columbia Airport. It appears we may have the new system up and running in early September. This makes the decision not to repair the existing system and easy one.

Meanwhile I suggest that pilots flying in and out of Columbia or Pine Mountain Lake obtain an altimeter setting from either the Calaveras AWOS on 118.575 mhz (209-736-2523) or the Mariposa AWOS on 135.60 mhz (209-966-2912)

High Price of Gasoline Leads to Fuel Siphoning

Even though the price of a barrel of oil has been dropping lately, the gas prices are still very high resulting in some people stealing fuel instead of purchasing it. Recently, Columbia Airport had a high wing aircraft owner report that he had 25 gallons of 100LL siphoned from his plane. A short time later the Ag Department reported that three of their trucks had been hit.

Although we do not have night time security, we do have ramp lighting which should deter most vandals. All pilots at the airport during the off hours should keep an eye out for any suspicious activity especially at night. The activity should be reported immediately to the Tuolumne County Sheriff's office dispatch at 533-5815.

Pilots should report any loss of fuel to my office so we can track the problem and establish any trends that might be useful in catching the thieves.

Used Oil Disposal

Both Columbia and Pine Mountain Lake Airports have facilities for collecting used engine oil and oil filters. This is a service that is provided to both pilots and homeowners. It needs to be emphasized that we are collecting used oil and oil filters, only. Empty oil cans, rags, and old buckets are not items that should be left in the oil collection buildings. These are regular garbage that should be placed in the trash can. Also, the airport does not collect old batteries. These should be taken to an auto parts store that will recycle them.

When disposing of used oil at Columbia Airport, please do not fill the buckets more than 4" from the top. If you have more oil than will fit in a single bucket, please use a second bucket. Buckets that are filled to the lip get spilled and are difficult to empty. Please make our job easier by not filling the buckets to the top.

At Pine Mountain Lake, please dump your oil into the large steel tanks and take the empty container back to your hangar or home. Often times we find full buckets placed beside the tank where they block access by others using the used oil facility.

It should be noted that most all the plastic oil cans are made of recyclable plastic. Once the containers have been thoroughly drained they can be put in a "Blue Bag" for recycling.

The Airport staff would appreciate everyone's help in keeping the used oil facilities clean and free of trash.

Stupid Pilot Tricks

Fire Safety

I'm not sure why some people just don't understand the dangers of playing with fire. We are currently in the middle of a Very High Fire Danger season and yet a few pilots that come to camp in the Columbia Airport Fly-In only campground continue to ask if they can have an open camp fire. Several times this summer we have seen the remains of a campfire where rocks have been collected and firewood gathered. Most of the times it appears the campers were fairly careful to construct their fire away from the dry grassy areas. However, we recently had one camper that not only built a fire in the taller grassy area, but he placed long sticks over the fire with the ends of the sticks running way outside the circle of rocks. It was evident that the camper went to sleep with the fire still burning because when I looked at the fire pit, the sticks were all laying outside the rock ring with the burnt ends pointing directly towards the center of the fire.

The campground at Columbia Airport does have several pedestal mounted charcoal barbecues for campers to use for grilling their dinner. The areas under the barbecues are clear of grass for fire safety. Additionally, we allow cook stoves to be used on the tables at each camp site. There is no reason why anyone should build an open fire. Doing so risks burning the whole campground.

Another fire safety issue that seems to be a problem is people smoking around the fuel storage area including the fuel trucks. Recently there have been numerous cigarette butts found on the ground adjacent to the fuel trucks in their parking area. This was brought to my attention by Bald Eagle Aviation employees and neither of them smoke cigarettes.

It is against the law to smoke within 50' a fuel storage tank or a parked fuel truck. Additionally, it is against the law to smoke within 50' of a plane being refueled. The reason for the law is that fumes are released from a tank when the tank is heated by an increase in the outside air temperature. These fumes can be quite explosive given the right fuel-air ratio, thus the reason to keep sources of ignition away from the tanks.

I know many people probably don't perceive a parked vehicle or fixed tank as a danger. This perception is correct, the vehicle and the tank are not the danger, it is the fuel vapors coming from the tanks that are the danger. For your safety and the safety of our airports, please don't smoke within 50' of our fuel tanks or fuel trucks.

The Manager's Approach is a monthly publication from the Tuolumne County Airports Director for the purpose of keeping our community informed of local aviation and airport issues. You can contact me at:

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