



Photo by Filipe Rafaeli

Texas Agricultural Aviation Association

Representing Texas Crop Dusters: This year, TAAA focuses on safety and fair tax practices for its operators.

By Jaime Lackey

Flying is always a challenge with little or no margin for error; however, flying in the agricultural industry presents unique obstacles for pilots. Whereas the typical GA “floor” is about 500 feet, agricultural pilots (or “ag-aviators”) generally fly 10 to 40 feet above the ground while applying product to a field. Recently, these pilots have learned to look more closely for cell phone and meteorological towers, which can pop up

in less than a day and without warning. When coupled with Texas’s considerable tax issues, the typical ag-aviator might feel like there’s a conspiracy brewing against them.

One organization, though, is on their side. The Texas Agricultural Aviation Association (TAAA) works to ensure its members are aware of safety issues such as those presented by these towers; and it lobbies on behalf of Texas’s

ag-aviators for safer conditions. Founded in 1951 as a social club, the TAAA was “really an excuse for a dozen or so operators to get together once or twice a year,” says TAAA President Will Garrett, who’s serving for the 2009 term. He’s also vice president of Danbury, Texas-

based crop dusting company, Garrett Flying Service.

Today, the TAAA and its 329 members have a more focused agenda. Approximately half its roster is composed of licensed agricultural pilots; while other members work for the operators or are employed by allied companies, including chemical dealers and aircraft parts distributors.

The association helps ag-aviators achieve required continuing education hours by coordinating classes through its Professional Aerial Applicators Support System (PAASS), which is sponsored by the National Agricultural Aviation Association (NAAA). PAASS presentations include information about topics ranging from pilot fatigue to homeland security; technical issues, such as drift control (or keeping product on the target area); new spray nozzles; and practicing for different weather conditions.

TAAA also works with state legislators to clarify tax issues faced by ag-aviators. In the past, operators were exempt from paying sales tax if they used the plane



Texas Representative Kelly Hancock and TAAA President Will Garrett.

exclusively on cropland. More recently, when the U.S. Forestry Service began hiring ag-aviators to fertilize pine trees, the legislature passed a new law offering sales tax exempt status for pilots only operating on timberland.

In one instance, however, a TAAA member worked on both cropland and timberland. Because an Internal Revenue Service audit concluded he didn't operate exclusively on either cropland or timberland, the state comptroller indicated he owed back taxes on the aircraft and all parts purchased for it. TAAA Executive Director Chris Shields interceded, however, and worked with the comptroller to settle the issue for the pilot. As of this article's publication, the association is still awaiting clarification of these laws by the legislature.

Additionally, the association is working to educate the state legislature about its practice of selling chemicals to farmers in order to prevent changes in how the sales margin tax affects the agricultural aviation industry. Currently, operators don't pay sales tax on the chemicals they carry. "We use many expensive chemicals, and we keep an inventory of them as a convenience to farmers," Garrett says. "We make less than 1 percent profit—if any—on those chemicals. That isn't how we make our money. Because of the huge cash flow, it would be detrimental to us if we had to pay taxes on gross income."

Despite these many issues, one of the major concerns covered in this year's PAASS presentations will be the proliferation of wind farms and cell

phone towers. According to Garrett, wind farms are growing rapidly in Texas, and ag-aviators have to spray crops growing around the wind towers—a dangerous undertaking, because the towers' turbines create turbulence up to a half a mile away. Further complicating the problem are companies interested in harvesting wind power, who are constructing 100- to 200-foot

towers usually have power lines leading to them and a road indicating the presence of a tower. These met towers are in the middle of nowhere and are also powered by solar panels."

Over the last 14 years, there have been 186 accidents nationwide resulting from agricultural aviators colliding with towers, wires and their supporting structures. According to the NAAA,

10 tower accidents have resulted in 10 fatalities, and only one pilot has survived a tower collision. (Two people were killed in a single tower collision in 2004.) The NAAA also reports that 176 wire accidents have resulted in 29 fatalities. All of these statistics mean 26.8 percent of the total 145 agricultural aviator deaths over the last 14 years have resulted from collisions with towers and wires.

In addition to educating members about the hazards of various towers, the TAAA is lobbying the state legislature to require that towers and guy wires have adequate marking, and to request better enforcement of current legislation regarding the visibility of towers. "We've gotten legislation passed regarding cell towers, but there's no enforcement," Garrett explains. "There are so many towers and no one is watching."

That is, no one except for the TAAA. Thus, while Texas's agricultural pilots are busy scanning the horizon for new obstacles, they can rest assured someone is looking out for them on all fronts. →

For more information about TAAA and the PAASS sessions being held this year, visit www.TAAA.org or call 512-476-4405.



meteorological ("met") towers to record atmospheric data in different locations.

"These met towers are very small—much harder to see than cell phone towers," says Garrett. "And they're going up anywhere there might be wind. They aren't on the maps, and there's no forewarning. Most radio and cell phone

No Guy Wire Left Behind: A Contest To Save Lives.

Because towers and guy wires are such a safety hazard for agricultural aviators, the NAAA is sponsoring the "No Guy Wire Left Behind" contest to develop a low-cost marker to help pilots applying crop protection products recognize and avoid the hazards of guy wires. The winner will receive \$1,000—not to mention the gratitude of ag-aviators nationwide. The deadline is September 1, 2009. For more information, visit www.agaviation.org.