

HAVE A SAFE FLIGHT



Photo by Pete McBride

Every day hundreds of planes take off or land at the Aspen Airport, 99% in opposite directions. ASE is known as one of the most dangerous airports in the country.

All agree safety is the top priority for Aspen's Airport, said to be the most dangerous in the US. Its airlines have had only a few mishaps injuring no one. But its General Aviation or "GA"—about 83% of flights—has had 39 federally investigated accidents or incidents in 33 years, causing 44 deaths, 16 serious injuries, and 16 destroyed airplanes. Barry Vaughan's new, unofficial, preliminary, non-expert, 58-year database for 1964–2022 reveals 124 federally investigated events (2.1 per year) with 120 deaths, 33 serious injuries, and 41 destroyed airplanes. Some details of his initial compilation may be further refined, but those stark totals shouldn't change.

Just this year, six times in six months our Airport was closed by GA pilots' runway mishaps. More than 120 airline flights got cancelled, diverted, or delayed more than an hour, disrupting roughly 6,000 passengers or a thousand per incident.

Private-pilot training

Aspen Airport's unforgiving flying conditions—close and steep terrain, fickle wind and weather, thin mountain air—require 99% of flights to take off and land in opposite directions on the same runway. Aspen is the only US airport flying both ways simultaneously. Its exquisite choreography takes air traffic controllers a year and a half to master. Yet unlike airline pilots, GA pilots landing here in daylight needn't have Aspen-specific training, and an estimated 90% don't.

Only the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) could require them to—and might if the County asked. Perhaps GA trade groups might agree that stricter pilot training for Aspen's unique conditions would be good for the industry as well as for public safety. The Airport Advisory Board's new Safety Task Force of local pilots will explore potential ways to make Aspen flying safer. Our Airport's unique portfolio of aviation hazards might even let Aspen lead the nation in flight-safety training.

Landing patterns and controls

Aspen Airport also needs more efficient operations. Its limited airspace is maxed out by high peak demand plus the head-to-head traffic's need to space successive planes 10–20 horizontal miles apart on their paths in and out (which may look too close together, but differ in height). FAA-encouraged congestion pricing of slots and parking hasn't been tried. Head-to-head traffic could also be reduced by potentially letting more planes with Aspen-proficient pilots enter safely from upvalley, not over town.

The control tower needs to be relocated and probably raised so controllers can see the whole airport and its approaches. Obsolescent and unreliable electronic landing aids on the ground must become as modern as the avionics aboard most jets. And our Airport needs reliable exclusion of wildlife—recently 200 elk—and of planes that may not meet all of Aspen's stringent safety requirements.

Prudent planning

Our community's splendid hospital and other medical facilities can handle a small-plane accident, and might stretch to one with a ~70-person plane. Our emergency response would be overwhelmed by added ground casualties—or by bigger planes now proposed, some with about twice the seats of today's airline planes.

Comprehensive aviation safety requires a systems approach, integrating many interactive solutions we'll next explore—and taking utmost care not to make the challenge even worse.



The copilot was killed and two were injured on 5 January 2014 when a plane landing at Aspen Airport in twice the allowed tailwind crashed, flipped, and burned. The experienced pilot and copilot had flown this type of aircraft or its simulator for only 14 hours, and never to Aspen. Photo by Leigh Vogel for The Aspen Times.

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and better Aspen Airport.*