

The



Left Seat

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IS GENERAL AVIATION DYING?

Is General Aviation dying? If you believe the FAA data, the correct answer is yes.

I am teaching a three-hour seminar for our local community college community education program on what it takes to become a pilot and about various careers in aviation. Only one person has signed up for the seminar. This course has been heavily promoted to aviation organizations and the non-flying public, but apparently, there is not much interest. Recently I received an email addressing the demise of GA and decided to check out some FAA figures and see for myself exactly what has been happening,

What I did was to use the FAA categories, which might best define the lower end of GA. Going into the FAA's database on aviation statistics, I examined the figures for the past two decades on Private Pilots and Single Engine, piston airplanes. While most of us have suspected this has been happening, now I have the cold, hard facts, not just suppositions and conjectures. Again, I'm only looking at data that mostly pertains to the majority of non-professional GA pilots. Here is what I found.

The pilot population in the US is shrinking, the number of hours flown is becoming less each year, and the average age of the US pilots is getting older. This chart reveals what is happening.

Some other facts also should be mentioned. The group of professional pilots, especially ATPs is increasing.

When you look at the total pilot population comparing 2008 to 1990 you see that today there are almost 90,000 less pilots or a loss of 12%. This is in spite of the increase of ATPs. The Sport Pilot certificate was created to allow more people to fly with less hassle, less cost, and less time for training. It was seen as a way to get more young people airborne. However, the average age of people becoming Sport Pilots is 53. The typical Private student pilot is in his or her mid 30s.

The bottom line: the only young people undergoing pilot training are those pursuing a career in aviation. The days of learning to fly just for pure pleasure are going away.

Why this is happening should not be a big mystery to any pilot.

First are the enormous costs to become a pilot. Getting a Sport Pilot certificate can run from \$4000 to \$6000 and up. Becoming a Private Pilot costs from \$6000-\$7000 to \$11,000 and higher. Accelerated training programs at certified flight schools allow full-time students to complete the training in two weeks for Sport Pilots and three weeks for the Private Pilots. Professional full-time pilot training programs run from four to six months and cost from \$38,000 to \$45,000 and beyond \$70,000 depending on what additional training

and hours and type ratings are desired. One reason the Mesa Airlines pilot training program terminated was the students were unable to obtain financing for their training. Learning to fly, as a leisure-time activity is very expensive compared to any other hobby.

A second problem with learning to fly is the time it takes. Mentioned above is the period for accelerated training programs. However, few people have the ability to carve 2-3 weeks out of their work schedules to become a pilot. Most student pilots must weave in the necessary hours for flight training in between career, family, and whatever little free time they might have. For some pilots-to-be; this process can take a few years.

Another factor that can't be ignored is how much it costs to fly, after obtaining one's pilot certificate. In 1975, at an Army flying club, my training C 150 cost me \$7 an hour, wet. My cost for last year to own, maintain, and fly my 1981 C 182 RG was about \$220 an hour. Sure, the two planes are nowhere close to being alike. My point is that 35 years ago flying was not that costly. Today it is. If you can find a C 150, it costs \$80-\$100 to rent, depending on its condition and avionics. The most popular rental plane is probably the C 172, which rents from \$100 to \$150 per hour, depending on age and equipment. There are not very many retractable 182s available for rent but a late model fixed gear 182 runs from \$185-\$220 an hour. Pilots must also consider the costs of personal equipment, charts, FAA medical, and the price of staying current and legal.

Then there is the need to remain abreast of all the rules and regulations. Buying an off-road 4X4, an RV, or a boat doesn't require a lot of training beyond

the initial training received (if any). The legal risks in using any of these vehicles are minimal...But not in aviation. The legal environment in which one flies is fraught with potential snags and pitfalls. The need to keep current with what one can and can't do with a plane and where one can or can't fly is a big turn-off for many people. They consider becoming a pilot to relax, not to spend hours studying and training just to fly legally.

And, our benevolent government does little to make flying easy or pleasant. The Dept of Homeland Security with the Transportation Security Administration and the FAA continually impose new rules and regulations, which appear more suited to eliminating GA than for safety or security reasons.

Becoming a pilot for fun faces too many obstacles to encourage young people to take up flying. In today's busy times, the value of any leisure time activities is often measured in terms of time, cost, and ease of usage. Learning to be a pilot and then employing this newly acquired skill falls very short in the time-cost criteria and the simplicity of remaining a safe and legal pilot.

Can anything be done to render flying a more attractive hobby or relaxing leisure activity? I doubt it. The Sport Pilot program and the new LSA aircraft were created to make flying fun and less expensive, encouraging more people to fly. However, that didn't happen. With the continued encroachment of the federal government on our flying and the spiraling costs, I do not see how it could get better, easier, or cheaper to fly. As time marches on the older GA pilots (like me) will be forced to quit due to either costs or physical impairments. The newer pilots are fewer and unless something major changes, GA will slowly disappear.

Pilot categories	# of Pvt pilots	average age	SE hrs flown	# of SE aircraft
2008	222,596	47	12.75 million	145,497
1990	299,111	42	21.88 million	154,000
% change	- 26%	+ 12%	- 42%	- 6%

If these figures do not reflect that GA is slowly dying, I don't know what other proof one might need.

