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Sport-Plane Makers Warned by FAA to Stop Evading Rules

By Alan Levin on June 29, 2012

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U.S. regulators warned manufacturers of so-called light sport aircraft that many of them are violating safety standards and could be shut down.

Most makers aren't following rules that were streamlined to help a struggling industry, the Federal Aviation Administration said in a Federal Register filing yesterday.

Manufacturers audited by the agency couldn't prove planes were properly built and inspected, and weren't able to notify plane owners of safety directives, the FAA said. In some cases, planes built in unapproved nations were shipped through third countries to make it appear they were properly constructed, according to the agency.

"They are just getting started," Dan Johnson, president of the Light Aircraft Manufacturers Association, said of the FAA crackdown in a telephone interview. The Port Orange, Florida-based group represents 60 firms in the industry, according to its website.

While he didn't dispute the FAA's findings, Johnson said there's no indication that planes are unsafe. The association sent a letter June 8 urging plane makers to keep adequate records and comply with FAA regulations.

Light-sport planes must weigh no more than 1,320 pounds (600 kilograms), can't hold more than two people and can't fly faster than 138 miles per hour (222 kilometers per hour). Manufacturers include Textron Inc. ([TXT](#))'s Cessna subsidiary and Tecnam North America, a division of Costruzioni Aeronautiche Tecnam in Italy.

Other manufacturers include Rans Designs Inc. of Hays, Kansas, and IndUS Aviation of Dallas, according to Johnson's website.

Streamlined Rules

The FAA created the light-sport category in 2004 in an attempt to boost the flagging private-plane industry, Johnson said. Through 2011, 2,235 of the planes have been registered in the U.S., he said.

The FAA allowed the industry to develop its own consensus standards for safety instead of imposing the manufacturing requirements for traditional aircraft builders.

In an attempt to assess the new industry, the FAA visited 30 manufacturers selling the planes in the U.S. Inspectors found many rule violations, according to a report the agency released in 2010.

Most makers did not keep records on each plane and aircraft owner to ensure quality, according to the report.

"We conclude that these lack of controls may result in the production and distribution of such poorly documented aircraft that it may be very difficult to verify conformity," the agency said in the report.

Foreign Manufacturers

The FAA also said it found irregularities in how U.S. firms imported aircraft or plane parts. FAA regulations require that aircraft manufactured outside the U.S. be assembled in countries that have agreed to follow U.S. standards. U.S. firms must ensure that parts are built to proper standards.

In some cases, all or most of the construction had been done in other nations, even when U.S. firms told the FAA that they were the manufacturer, according to the agency's filing. When that happened, the U.S. companies could not guarantee that the planes were properly built.

The agency won't license planes of light-sport manufacturers that don't follow the rules, effectively halting their ability to sell them, according to the notice. Planes previously licensed won't be affected, it said.

The notice didn't explain why the agency is acting now, two years after its report.

Crash Rate

Light-sport aircraft appear to have a higher accident rate than other private planes, according to Bruce Landsberg, president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association Foundation, which oversees the group's Air Safety Institute. The Frederick, Maryland-based association represents more than 400,000 pilots and aviation enthusiasts.

Because the category is so new, there isn't enough data to say how much higher the accident rate is or what may be causing the difference, Landsberg said in a phone interview. There have been an average of about seven private-plane crashes per 100,000 flight hours each year since 2000, according to U.S. National Transportation Safety Board statistics.

As more planes enter the U.S. market, light-sport accidents have increased, Landsberg said. There were 27 accidents in 2010, seven of them fatal, about double the number in 2006, he said.

'Normal Oversight'

The FAA crackdown doesn't threaten the industry, Johnson said. He called it normal growing pains for a business that has existed for less than a decade.

"This is reasonable and normal oversight by government," he said.

Most of the violations uncovered by the FAA involved a failure to keep paperwork, he said.

"Missing a document doesn't mean an airplane wasn't built right," he said. "It just means you can't prove it was built a certain way."

In its notice of the crackdown, the FAA gave the public 90 days to comment.

To contact the reporter on this story: Alan Levin in Washington at alevin24@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Bernard Kohn at bkohn2@bloomberg.net

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