



**U.S. Department  
of Transportation  
Federal Aviation  
Administration**

# SAFO

Safety Alert for Operators

SAFO 21005  
DATE: 7/27/21

Flight Standards Service  
Washington, DC

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*A SAFO contains important safety information and may include recommended action. Besides the specific action recommended in a SAFO, an alternative action may be as effective in addressing the safety issue named in the SAFO. The contents of this document do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the public in any way. This document is intended only to provide clarity to the public regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies.*

**Subject:** Risks Associated with Visual Approaches.

**Purpose:** This SAFO warns airplane operators and pilots of risks associated with visual approaches.

**Background:** To expedite traffic, Air Traffic Control (ATC) may clear pilots for a visual approach in lieu of the published instrument approach procedure. Visual approaches reduce pilot/controller workload and expedite traffic by shortening flight paths to the airport. However, this expediency must be balanced with safety. It is the pilot's responsibility, pursuant to 14 C.F.R. § 91.3, to advise ATC as soon as possible if a visual approach is not desired.

**Discussion:** During 2017 and 2018, in response to an increase in trends, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) conducted risk assessments of both Class B airspace excursion events and wrong surface events (i.e., incorrect airport surface approaches and landings). The assessments indicated that visual approaches are a common contributing factor to both types of events. Based on the assessments, the risk of experiencing a Class B airspace excursion and/or a wrong surface event was greatly increased where visual approach clearances were accepted.

These risks can be mitigated effectively by employing strategies such as:

- A.** Judicious use of visual approaches. When practicable, pilots should consider requesting an instrument approach to reduce the likelihood of aligning with the wrong runway or a taxiway, and/or exiting controlled airspace. When a visual approach is conducted, strictly adhere to company standard operating procedures, utilize the navigational aids associated with the assigned runway, and maintain a stabilized approach.
- B.** Communicating "UNABLE" to ATC when, in the judgment of the pilot-in-command (PIC), compliance with a specific instruction, request, or clearance may reduce safety. For example, in considering an ATC clearance/instruction, if the judgment of the PIC is that there is inadequate time to recalculate the aircraft's landing performance, reconfigure avionics, brief the new approach procedure, brief the new runway exiting and taxi plan, or otherwise stabilize the approach, then state "UNABLE" and request the desired instrument approach.

**Recommended Action:** The FAA recommends Directors of Operations, Directors of Safety, Directors of Training, and Chief Pilots to:

- Ensure all training programs include scenario-based modules, which stress the risk mitigation strategies in this SAFO, and best practices in SAFO 17001; “*Pilot and Flightcrew Awareness of Class B Airspace Boundaries*” (January 29, 2017), and SAFO 17010; “*Incorrect Airport Surface Approaches and Landings*” (August 18, 2017).
- Monitor visual approach trends, taking appropriate action in accordance with Title 14 of the Code of Federal Regulations Part 5 *Safety Management Systems*.

**Contact:** Questions or comments regarding this SAFO should be directed to the General Aviation and Commercial Division at (202) 267-1100.