

Temporary Flight Restrictions Affect MA

By now I'm guessing most everyone has at least heard the term "TFR" and perhaps even been affected by one. A Temporary Flight Restriction is a type of Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) issued by the FAA that defines an area with restricted air travel due to a hazardous condition, a special event, or a general warning for the entire airspace.

In the past, TFRs were primarily used to restrict air traffic over extraordinary ground-based situations to protect the individuals involved and to facilitate the ingress and egress of aircraft working the situation. Typically TFRs are used to facilitate firefighting efforts, law-enforcement situations, and rescue operations during natural disasters.

At times they are used during large spectator events and open-air assemblies such as air shows and sporting events. They are also used during serious mishaps such as airplane crashes and most recently the Gulf oil spill.

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, TFRs have been increasingly used for security purposes to thwart potential terrorist activity. They are now being used to protect VIP travel around the country, high-profile international events such as the G-20 Summit and the Olympics, and NASA activities such as space shuttle operations at the Kennedy Space Center.

Until recently, model aviation (MA) was not significantly affected when a TFR was issued. However, in the post-September 11 era, model airplanes have come under much closer scrutiny and the performance capabilities of the current MA technology has heightened the perceived threat attributed to model aircraft.

The perceived threat has been accentuated by the advancements in the unmanned aircraft (UAV/UAS) arena and the lethal capability of the UAS operating in the Middle East. Unfortunately from a regulatory standpoint, we're now closely tied to commercial- and public-use UAS aircraft and, to an extent, viewed as presenting a similar security threat.

TFRs come in all shapes and sizes, and fortunately MA is only affected by those with the most stringent restrictions. TFRs affecting MA were first issued in 2004, as part of the security measures put in place for the Republican and Democratic National Conventions.

In January 2009, a TFR was issued to cover the activities and events leading up to and including the presidential inauguration. A permanent MA restriction was thereafter enacted for the Washington Metropolitan

Flight Restriction Zone (FRZ) surrounding the nation's capital.

Since then, more than 100 TFRs have been issued restricting model airplane operations in locations across the country. TFRs are usually in effect for anywhere from a few hours to a few days; however, some have restricted MA activities for several weeks.

TFRs that have an impact on MA typically involve a 60 nautical-mile (69 statute mile) outer circle and a 20-nautical-mile inner circle around a given set of coordinates. The outer circle establishes a 3,737 square-mile area in which model airplane operations are prohibited during the specified times of the TFR. The inner circle establishes an area in which heightened restrictions are imposed on manned aviation.

The prohibition of model airplane operations is specifically stated in the TFR in a paragraph restricting all sport aviation groups:

"The following operations are not authorized within this TFR: flight training, practice instrument approaches, aerobatic flight, glider operations, parachute operations, ultralight, hang gliding, balloon operations, agriculture/crop dusting, animal population control flight operations, banner towing operations, seaplane operations, sightseeing operations, maintenance test flights, model aircraft operations, model rocketry, and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS)."

From a security standpoint, the concept is to create a "sterile" area in which all nonessential air traffic is grounded and in which only those aircraft that are under positive air traffic control are allowed to fly. As such, anything else that pops up is immediately considered suspect.

The FAA enacts and administers TFRs. However, the establishment and execution of the restrictions are a joint effort involving numerous federal, state, and local agencies including the Secret Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, US Department of Justice, and US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, just to name a few.

Although, on occasion, Flight Advisories are published in advance when TFRs are anticipated for upcoming events, TFR notices are typically distributed 24-48 hours before implementation. The short lead time is itself a security measure but brings with it the challenge of getting the information out to those affected by the restrictions.

The AMA is committed to keeping its members informed and is doing everything possible to get TFR information out to the membership in a timely manner. The Academy is currently included in the initial e-mail distribution used in publishing the TFRs.

When a new TFR notice comes in, it is immediately posted on Twitter, the AMA Web site, and the AMA news scroll and RSS feed. The AMA membership records and club roster are searched, and an e-mail distribution is sent to all members and clubs in the affected area.

Any changes or updates to the TFR are posted to the Web and Twitter. Members can find the most up-to-date information by logging on to the AMA Web site or by following AMAGov at "Twitter.com/amagov."

From a modeler's point of view, the first reaction might be, "You've got to be kidding me!" and the inclination may be to dismiss it and ignore the TFR. But believe me, this is serious business.

Under federal regulation, the US government may "pursue criminal charges" or "use deadly force against an aircraft if it is determined that the aircraft poses an imminent security threat." I, for one, would not want to be the one to test the waters.

That having been said, AMA clearly believes that the security threat attributed to model airplanes is grossly overstated and that the security measures imposed are overreaching and excessive.

The AMA is currently working with the National Aeronautic Association and the other sport-aviation groups in an effort to open a dialog with the FAA Special Operations Security Center toward obtaining relief for our members and the modeling community in general. The first step will be to address AMA sanctioned events for which abrupt cancellation poses a demonstrative impact and an undue economic hardship.

The next step will be to address established flying sites affiliated with our chartered clubs, and ultimately to exclude MA from the TFRs altogether. Unfortunately, this will be a very long, drawn-out process, and it is unlikely that we will see any real relief in the immediate future.

For now, please be patient, continue to fly in a safe and responsible manner, and, most importantly, continue to enjoy this great hobby. **MA**

—Rich Hanson

AMA Government and Regulatory Affairs