

Surviving a Ramp Inspection

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“Good morning! I’m with the FAA, and I’m here to conduct a Ramp Inspection!” These words often strike fear in the hearts of pilots everywhere, but it need not be so. To my great surprise, I have been Ramp Checked quite a few times during my 52 years of flying, (even once in France) and am glad to report that each opportunity for the FAA “to help” was met with success. The key lies in knowing what to expect, and having your paperwork in order. In this article, I would like to address what constitutes the latter, with particular attention paid to the Program Letter. What is that, you say? If you don’t know, perhaps you better read on.

First of all, it is always best to receive the FAA politely, and it is entirely appropriate for you to ask to see the inquiring party’s ID. This provides you with important information: first, in knowing that they really are an FAA Inspector, and second, what branch of authority they operate under: Operations, Maintenance, or Avionics. I have had the pleasure of meeting with both of the first two types, but never the third, and the reason this is important to know is that each type of Inspector has a different focus.

The Operations Inspector may only be interested in seeing your valid Airman Certificate, and if he asks to see your Medical Certificate, politely remind him that Glider Pilots don’t need one, even if you are flying a Touring Motor glider that somewhat resembles an Airplane. (If you hold a Medical Certificate, and he insists, best to show it to him) A Maintenance Inspector is often most interested in the aircraft documents: Registration & Airworthiness Certificates, and in the case of a Light Sport or Experimental-Exhibition and Racing Aircraft, Operating Limitations. In the case of an Experimental aircraft certificated in the category of “Exhibition and Racing,” like many of our sailplanes are, there is also one other, often overlooked document that is supposed to be on board the aircraft as well, and that is the Program Letter.

The Program Letter is a document that is a statement written by the owner/operator to formally enumerate several things. As dictated by FAR 21.193, these include who the owner is, who is responsible for maintenance, for what purpose the aircraft is flown and typically how much, and where it will be operated. When a DAR certifies an aircraft in the “Exhibition and/or Racing” category, he should explain that it is not for him, but rather the owner to write and update the Program Letter, and often shares a template for the owner to do just that. Let me emphasize that with or without DAR assistance, it is the owner’s responsibility to create the Program Letter and file it with the FAA. Unfortunately, I have seen many cases wherein the owner, overcome by the joy of acquiring of a new and exotic sailplane, forgets to either create or file the letter. (Not good to discover on Ramp Check day)

A detailed summary of the Program Letter can be found at <http://www.faa-aircraft-certification.com/program-letter.html>, and consists of the following 7 parts:

1. Registered owner's name and address.
2. Aircraft Description, to include N number, builder, year of manufacture, serial number, and aircraft model.
3. Program Purpose.
4. Estimated Flight Hours, including number of flights each year, and their duration. (remember, this is your letter, and it is an estimate, so be generous)
5. Aircraft Base and Area of Operation. (each FSDO may have specific desires on operating area, typically flown within a 300 nm radius of a named city, but you can put any and/or all the cities you want in this section, to literally connect the entire USA if desired)
6. Aircraft Configuration or 3-View Drawing.
7. Date, Name, Title, and Signature of Owner/Operator.

Please note that the Program Letter is to be kept current by an update each year, and many FSDO's like to see a new one each Jan 1, or on each anniversary of the issuance of the Certificate of Airworthiness. As with many areas of FAA oversight, each FSDO can have its own desires, so communicate with the Primary Maintenance Inspector (PMI) at your FSDO to determine just what they want, and update your letter accordingly.

One question I often get is does the Program Letter have to be re-issued with a change in ownership? The obvious answer is Yes-see part 1 of the above. What is not so obvious is that depending on how the Operating Limitations are written, a new Airworthiness Certificate might also be required with a change of ownership for both Light Sport and Experimental-Exhibition and Racing aircraft. So, read those Operating Limitations carefully when you become a new owner.

Armed with the knowledge above, you can now meet and greet the FAA with open arms when they come calling, knowing that you are totally in compliance with pertinent guidelines. Happy soaring in the New Year!