FAA to allow display of own-ship on EFB apps

by Matt Thurber

The FAA has signaled a sea-change in its attitude about display of own-ship position on electronic flight bags (EFBs) and recently issued Advisory Circular (AC) guidance supporting that feature in all phases of flight. The agency also is stepping back from in-depth involvement with operators in managing their EFB programs.

AC120-76D replaces the -C version issued in 2014, which for commercial operators specifically prohibited use of geo-referencing or own-ship position display while using moving-map features in the air. Use of geo-referencing on the ground was previously considered acceptable by the agency.

This new guidance applies to Part 91, 91K, 121, 125, and 135 operators, but only 91K through 135 operators are required to seek FAA approval of their EFB programs. Part 91 operators can use EFBs as they wish, without formal approval, and many pilots have been using geo-referenced moving maps and approach charts to aid situational awareness since the iPad entered the market in 2010.

In an effort to quell the use of own-ship position displays while flying, the FAA encouraged EFB app developers to add a switch to turn off geo-referencing.

Under the new version of the AC, the FAA said it “is removing its previous prohibition on the display of aircraft location during flight on various EFB applications. Previously, this function was available only on the ground.”

The other significant update is that operators will be able to make changes to their EFB programs without contacting their FAA principal inspector, according to the FAA. Previously, if an operator wanted to use a new feature in an updated version of the app, then coordination with the principal inspector was required.

The FAA explained the other changes: “Specifically, the new policy eliminates all guidance associated with EFB classification, clarifies the definition of an ‘EFB,’ and reorganizes EFB application software types according to safety importance.”

This means no more EFB classes 1, 2 and 3. And the new definition of an EFB is simple: “a device displaying EFB applications.” EFB software application types are now categorized according to safety level, with A being the highest, followed by B.

Satcom Direct, ForeFlight team on ‘own-ship’ notification

Satcom Direct and ForeFlight have integrated their service offerings so that the Satcom Direct Router (SDR) can serve as data source to display “own-ship” location on ForeFlight’s Performance electronic flight bag app without additional GPS hardware, the companies announced at NBAA 2017.

With GPS location, groundspeed, and altitude information, passengers and crew traveling with an iPad or iPhone can track their flight’s progress in real time. When linked to SDR’s Internet-connected Wi-Fi, ForeFlight customers also can receive and display high-resolution radar, icing, turbulence, winds aloft, and other graphical weather layers.

“Pilots rely on accurate timely delivery of essential information to maintain secure operations,” said Jim Jensen, founder and chairman of Satcom Direct. “Integrating these solutions provides pilots with a clear, unimpeded view of their real-time situation.”

The SDR own-ship integration is available to ForeFlight Performance Plus and Business Performance customers. S.B.

Added Value for Operators

A variety of stakeholders helped the FAA craft the new EFB guidance, including other regulators, the ICAO Operations Panel and industry participants, such as app developer ForeFlight.

According to ForeFlight co-founder and CEO Tyson Wehls, the new guidance will be a huge benefit for professional pilots “in operations that previously were unable to utilize own-ship position due to the restrictions imposed by prior ACs.”

Pilots have been enjoying the benefits of own-ship position since the iPad brought tablet computers into widespread use. “Nearly every pilot flying with an iPad since then has observed first hand the benefits that own-ship provides—situational awareness on a taxi chart, approach plate or en route—and especially when paired with in-flight weather receivers,” he said.

What helped convince the FAA to make the switch concerning own-ship position display is that companies such as ForeFlight designed the apps to assess the quality of position information. Wehls explained, “What the FAA saw—with input from industry and operators—was that there are sufficient ways to mitigate the concerns they had about display of own-ship position. I think they also understood the value, but they had to get comfortable [with] the ways that companies like ForeFlight use information about the quality of the position source/information to remove own-ship position from the display when the GPS accuracy [quality of the position information] exceeded a threshold.”

Wehls sees the FAA’s move as a huge boon for commercial operations. “This paves the way to unlocking substantial value from flight apps like ForeFlight or Jeppesen FliteDeck Pro,” he noted. “The two companies are working together under an alliance agreement.”

Many other EFB app developers will benefit from this new FAA guidance, for example, Honeywell and its GoDirect FlightBag Pro app, which combines flight planning with performance calculations and real-time weather updates, as well as display of own-ship position on a moving-map. The combination of powerful EFBs with growing availability of airborne Internet connectivity on many aircraft gives pilots access to an extraordinary amount of useful information.

“Now that pro-operators can display own-ship in all phases of flight,” Wehls continued, “apps can assist with tasks like inflight re-planning from present position to destination when combined with our high-performance flight planning engine, identify paths around weather, advise the pilot on route changes or altitude changes for smoother rides, pro-actively enable flight crews to request re-routes based on weather, and most importantly, show pilots where they are in relation to radar echoes, icing, and turbulence. The value this could unlock for flight operations is easily measured in the billions of dollars, globally.”