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Airport Owners Panic Over Plummeting Profits

By *Justin Paprocki*
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ANNAPOLIS - Owners of small airfields in Maryland are losing thousands of dollars a day and their properties could close because flights were halted from the airports nationwide after hijacked jetliners crashed into the Pentagon and World Trade Center last week.

Stanley Rodenhauser, owner of Freeway Aviation in Bowie, said he lost 10 pounds in the past week because he isn't sure whether his airfield will be in operation next week.

"We're going to go bankrupt," he said. "We cannot do anything. I never thought at 60 years old that, in this great country, I could be homeless."

Making matters worse: Rodenhauser also learned one of the suspected hijackers attempted to rent a plane from his airfield. "I felt like someone had raped my wife," he said.

Since the morning of Sept. 11, the FAA grounded all flights that use visual flight rules, or sight navigation. Major airlines have been allowed to fly limited flights, and all large airports but Reagan National in Washington have reopened.

General aviation flights, however, have resumed only in Alaska and for agricultural purposes across the nation. Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association officials have told the FAA about the impact the ban has had on general aviation, but national security officers still have security concerns about VFR flights.

"I ask the patience of the flying public," said Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta in a recent statement. "Please remember that we are recovering from a massive disruption and widespread shock."

Small airports nationwide are losing more than \$4,000 a day, said Keith Mordoff, spokesman for the owners and pilots group. Freeway Aviation could see layoffs of some of its 25 full-time workers to make up for losses, Rodenhauser said.

Freeway Aviation derives its revenue from flight training and rentals of its 16 planes, as well as from parts and fuel services.

"All this stuff is worth nothing," Rodenhauser said. "If it [the ban] continues much longer, the industry will be destroyed." And he said he isn't getting much information from the government. "They will not tell you a thing," he said. "No one is listening to us. We cannot get through to anybody."

Members of Congress are discussing a \$17.5 billion aid package to the airline industry. Meanwhile, the FAA is planning to phase in normal standards for general aviation flights but does not know when full operation will resume, said Hank Price, FAA spokesman.

"We're [general aviation] kind of on the bottom of the food chain when it comes to these things," said James Davidson, owner of ATC Flight Training Center in Fort Washington. "No one is saying anything to me directly."

Davidson is getting plenty of calls from pilots and trainees asking when the airfield will reopen. If the airport reopens soon, he said he "expects to be overwhelmed." If the ban continues beyond this week, he said, "we're looking at closing down."

The database of those who have taken classes at the ATC Flight Training Center has been turned over to the FBI because of concerns some of the hijackers might have taken classes there, Davidson said.

Freeway Airport evaluated suspected hijacker Hani Hanjour when he attempted to rent a plane. He took three flights with the instructors in the second week of August, but flew so poorly he was rejected for the rental, said Marcel Bernard, chief flight instructor at Freeway.

The standard evaluation consists of one- to one-and-a-half-hour flights east over the Chesapeake Bay area. Hanjour paid \$400 cash and provided a valid pilot's license from Arizona, Bernard said. He failed because he showed problems landing the airplane, and the flight instructor had to help him, Bernard said.

But Hanjour's problems were nothing unusual, Bernard said. "At the time, he didn't raise any red flags," he said. "He never did get angry or make any unusual statements."

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