

Other sources of risk management training available to the pilot are the various pilot organizations, such as the Airplane Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA), and numerous aircraft associations. All these organizations have variations of pilot experiences and solutions to situations in their publications. AOPA’s Air Safety Foundation provides live seminars throughout the country and online training at the AOPA website: www.aopa.org.

Setting Personal Minimums

One of the most important concepts that safe pilots understand is the difference between what is “legal” in terms of the regulations, and what is “smart” or “safe” in terms of pilot experience and proficiency. By establishing personal minimums, pilots can take a big step in managing risk. In the article, “Getting the Maximum from Personal Minimums,” (May/June 2006 FAA Aviation News), the FAA General Aviation and Commercial Division, AFS-800, discusses six steps for establishing personal minimums.

Step 1—Review Weather Minimums

Most people think of personal minimums primarily in terms of weather conditions, so begin with a quick review of weather definitions. The regulations define weather flight conditions for visual flight rules (VFR) and instrument flight rules (IFR) in terms of specific values for ceiling and visibility. [Figure 8-1]

IFR is defined as a ceiling less than 1,000 feet above ground level (AGL) and/or visibility less than three miles. Low instrument flight rules (LIFR) is a subcategory of IFR. VFR has ceiling greater than 3,000 feet AGL and visibility greater than five miles. Marginal visual flight rules (MVFR) is a subcategory of VFR.

| Category | Ceiling | | Visibility |
|--|-----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|
| Visual Flight Rules VFR (green sky symbol) | Greater than 3,000 feet AGL | and | Greater than 5 miles |
| Marginal Visual Flight Rules MVFR (blue sky symbol) | 1,000 to 3,000 feet AGL | and/or | 3 to 5 miles |
| Instrument Flight Rules IFR (red sky symbol) | 500 to below 1,000 feet AGL | and/or | 1 mile to less than 3 miles |
| Low Instrument Flight Rules LIFR (magenta sky symbol) | below 500 feet AGL | and/or | less than 1 mile |

Figure 8-1. The regulations define weather flight conditions for visual flight rules (VFR) and instrument flight rules (IFR) in terms of specific values for ceiling and visibility.

Step 2—Assess Experience and Comfort Level

At first glance, this part of the process might look a bit complicated. It might take a few minutes to review, record, and summarize your personal experience, but you will find the finished product is well worth your time.

First, think back through your flight training and complete the Certification Training, an Experience Summary chart in Figure 8-2. The Certification, Training, and Experience Summary is adapted from the FAA’s Personal and Weather Risk Assessment Guide (October 2003). It can be found at www.faa.gov.

Next, think through your recent flying experiences and make a note of the lowest weather conditions that you have comfortably experienced as a pilot in your VFR and, if applicable, IFR flying in the last 6–12 months. You might want to use the charts in Figures 8-3 through 8-5 as guides for this assessment, but do not think that you need to fill in every square. In fact, you may not have, or even need, an entry for every category. Suppose that most of your flying takes place in a part of the country where clear skies and visibilities of 30 plus miles are normal. Your entry might specify the lowest VFR ceiling as 7,000, and the lowest visibility as 15 miles. You may have never experienced MVFR conditions at all, so you would leave those boxes blank.

For example, in a part of the country where normal summer flying often involves hazy conditions over relatively flat terrain, pilots who know the local terrain could regularly operate in hazy daytime MVFR conditions (e.g., 2,500 and four miles), and would use the MVFR column to record these values.