



Truckee Airport is Leading the Way

Innovative Fly Safe program incentivizes pilot education and proficiency in mountainous terrain

By Nina Miller - September 11, 2025

Our mountains and lakes are breathtakingly beautiful. They provide an awe-inspiring backdrop for recreation, activities, sports, and fun. They also create a particularly challenging flying environment in any conditions. Yet, the area attracts countless flight enthusiasts and recreational pilots, many from the Bay Area.

The Truckee Tahoe Airport (KTRK) sits at 5,901 feet, surrounded by ridges and peaks, and winds can be quite gusty and unpredictable. Summer heat changes the density altitude, meaning that the air appears thinner than it should be at that altitude, affecting airplane performance. Uneven terrain and temperature differences create downdrafts, updrafts, wind shear, turbulence, and inversions.



To fly safely in these conditions, continued education and proficiency are key for pilots. Nevertheless, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requirements for keeping a general aviation license current are minimal — just one hour of ground instruction and one hour of flying with a certified flight instructor (CFI) every 24 months, though it does offer more extensive training through its WINGS – Pilot

WAITING FOR CLEARANCE to start from Truckee air traffic control with another Cirrus SR22 approaching the lineup and Northstar in the background

Proficiency Program. (There is a lot more structure and mandatory training for commercial pilots, of course.) The Truckee Tahoe Airport Board, however, doesn't think that's enough and thus created Fly Safe, an innovative approach that demonstrates the airport's commitment to safety.

Fly Safe is a sponsored initiative that incentivizes pilots to attend trainings more frequently than the basic FAA requirements. To make it more enticing, participants receive a \$75 monthly credit toward a hangar rental, or \$300 reimbursement for a CFI for the flight clinic portion if they're a local pilot or frequent KTRK. (Pilots have to provide their own plane or charter one for the flight activity.) Plus, the program focuses on high altitude conditions, mountainous terrain, hazards, and potentially strange weather.



MOUNTAIN LION AVIATION CEO, Director of Operations, and flight instructor Chris Barbera with one of its planes.

I met with Jeff Menasco, a former US Air Force colonel, wing commander, and pilot, who is now director of aviation at KTRK. He explained the motivation behind Fly Safe: "The airport's board of directors number one priority is on safety, and we are lowering the barrier to education and proficiency by providing this program. Pilots that participate in the FAA WINGS program have an 80% lower accident rate than the average general aviation pilot."



David Van Quest, Truckee Tahoe Airport District outreach coordinator, joined our conversation for a minute, and of course we talked about Fly Safe. He barely contained his enthusiasm, and shared that since attending Fly Safe events he feels more prepared.

“I plan each landing to be a go-around so that I’m ready for the unexpected,” he said. “I also carry a personal locator beacon in my pocket so that it’s easily accessible should I have to make an off-airport landing in a remote area.”

Quest is in charge of program execution and the point of contact for Fly Safe.

The program comprises two components — structured continuing education and pilot proficiency achieved via free monthly seminars and flight clinics. The ground workshops cover different topics and can be applied toward FAA WINGS requirements. To complete the Fly Safe program and qualify for the incentives, pilots must participate in three seminars and one flight activity within 12 months and continue to do so. Currently, 89 pilots are enrolled; 26 completed the program in 2024, and 20 in 2025 so far.

1 of 3 < >



STRATEGIES Considering the terrain and its effects on air flow, the pilot (left) and flight instructor Chris Barbera discuss the takeoff route on the ground in Truckee; strategize the best approach to South Lake Tahoe airport; and decide on an extra-steep turn before Spooner Summit for training purposes.

Menasco emphasized that “beyond the education and proficiency, these forums create a culture of continuous learning for our local aviation community and make everyone a safer pilot,” since pilots chat with other pilots, share stories and experiences, and stay engaged.

One goal is to familiarize pilots with mountainous conditions. Participants study in-depth how to read weather and geographical data — how the peaks and valleys and types of terrain influence air flow, where to find safe passages, and how to bail in an iffy situation — all critical skills to have. The seminars are often led by Chris Barbera, CEO and director of



operation at Mountain Lion Aviation, a charter operation and flight school at KTRK, which the airport district contracts with for the flight clinics.

Then, it's all put into practice during a 90-minute flight with a CFI. The goal is to push the pilots to experience challenging situations on purpose — feeling the effect of the downdraft when taking off toward Northstar, finding the best line to cross over to Tahoe, or experiencing crosswinds landing in Minden, for example.

I was excited to be invited on such a flight, and on a Friday afternoon in August I climbed into the back seat of a privately owned Cirrus SR22. The owner and pilot, Craig Carlson, and Barbera took their seats and off we went. I was prepped with my camera and phone, observing the conversations between the pilots.

We took off, circled over the airport in a full 360-degree left turn, as I had been promised, and headed over Brockway Summit and on to Tahoe's East Shore toward the Lake Tahoe Airport (KTVL) in South Lake Tahoe. The two pilots continuously discussed ridges, air flow, wind shear, and what might be going on under different weather conditions. As we descended, I promptly, unexpectedly, started feeling queasy. Sitting in the back looking through a lens most of the time apparently didn't agree with me.

At KTVL, we performed a surprise go-around (aborting the landing just before touch-down and going back up) per Barbera's instruction to put Carlson in an unexpected situation and made a sweeping turn to the right back out to the lake and over Kingsbury Grade to Minden, hoping for crosswinds for landing. To Barbera's dismay and my delight, winds were mild.

After taking off again from Minden, the route took us over to Spooner Summit, where winds can act like "rotors," as Barbera said, and the pilot must decide on the best way through — closer to the left side of the mountains or the right?

Because these training flights are designed to push the pilot, Barbera asked Carlson to pretend like we weren't making it over the saddle and to bail. Carlson promptly turned the plane at a 30-degree angle. Me, I grabbed a quick shot of the cockpit and started looking for a paper bag (which I did not need, thankfully).

I later asked Carlson what he thought about the program. Although he's had mountain flying training in the past, "This course allowed me to experience things like up- and downdrafts near terrain that made the learning much more visceral. I found it to be a great experience," he said.

He was "also impressed with how forward-looking the Truckee airport is about safety and making these sorts of courses available to the public."

Just how proactive is this program?

"I don't know of any other airport that offers this — a sponsored program to improve pilot safety," said Barbera.

Way to go, Truckee!

To learn more, go to truckeetahoeairport.com/current-projects/fly-safe



Up, Up, and AWAY: Flying from Minden airport over Spooner Summit, navigating its challenging wind conditions, and along the East Shore back to Truckee.

Author



Nina Miller

Nina Miller has been a Moonshiner for many years, with a short break. She also owns her own portrait and wedding photography business based in Incline Village, and loves to travel whenever possible, preferably with her teenage son. Nina enjoys walks by the lake and skiing Tahoe's phenomenal slopes.



