

Crop-dusters happy to be flying again

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The sky over Wes Addison's little airfield in Seminole buzzed with activity Tuesday afternoon as yellow-and-blue striped crop-duster airplanes cruised in just long enough to refuel then take off again.

Addison, co-owner of Addison Flying Service, landed his yellow-and-blue striped Air-Tractor and stopped it in the hangar just long enough for the ground crew to refuel it and replenish its supply of chemicals. In the few moments before taking off again, Addison spoke about the series of government-imposed groundings.

He said Tuesday's activity is pretty close to a typical day, but if the breakneck pace evident yesterday afternoon is normal, then normal must be hectic.

One reason for the pace was the Federal Aviation Administration's decision to lift its two-day ban on crop-dusters the second such grounding. The first grounding followed immediately in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, and the second amidst fears that crop dusters could be used to spread deadly nerve gas, or a contagion like anthrax.

Several reports have surfaced that one of the men suspected in the Sept. 11 hijackings of four airliners tried to get a loan from the U.S. Agriculture Department to buy a crop-dusting plane. Attorney General John Ashcroft told Congress the FBI had gathered information that crop-

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dusters could be used in a biological or chemical attack. At the FBI's request, the planes were grounded Sunday and Monday.

The threat, which never indicated any specific target, seemed slight enough by Tuesday that officials permitted crop-dusters to take to the air again.

The series of groundings hurt Addison's business and others like him in other areas. "It's hurt our business a little bit. We're a real seasonal business right now we should be at the peak of our season," said Scott Nolen, manager of Nolen Ag Services in a phone interview Tuesday. "One thing that's hurt the most is customers' losing confidence because they don't know when we can fly and when we can't."

Wes Addison said many of his customers, unwilling or unable to wait for the FAA order to be lifted, had their crops sprayed with ground equipment.

But for the most part, especially during the second grounding, their customers were patient, said Clint Addison, co-owner of Addison Flying Service.

"Our customers understood 100 percent and they waited on us," Clint Addison said. Addison feels the grounding of crop-dusters was justified the first time, but that the second grounding was an overreaction.

"After the first time, I don't think it was justified," Wes Addison said.

Addison has nine airplanes running from his service, although not all of them are at Seminole right now.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, several in the government have worried that somebody might gain access to a crop-duster and use it to spread a chemical or biological agent over an urban area.

Most crop-duster pilots say that fear is exaggerated. They

also say that flying a crop-duster is actually harder than flying a jetliner, pointing out that the controls of a jetliner are computerized and automatic, while a crop-duster, despite its \$300,000 price tag, relies less on technology and more on a skilled pilot. They also point out that a crop-duster is not an airplane that a beginner could fly with ease.

"It isn't something somebody can just jump in and do," said David Hill, a pilot who stopped briefly between flights at Addison's landing strip Tuesday.

Flying crop-dusters poses a special challenge in part because of the low altitude and speed the pilots must use—dodging everything from large birds, to power lines.

"When you're down that low going that fast, you have to be paying attention ... your mind better be right there with you," Clint Addison said.

Other area crop duster pilots said much the same thing, indicating that their profession had been unfairly cast in a bad light because of public hysteria.

"We protect this American food all year round ... it looks like they're singling us out for something we didn't cause," said Donald Kubbecka, with AG Aero in a phone interview Tuesday. "We work every day to protect these crops ... and it's just sad when we've got to be shut down."

Kubbecka also indicated he felt his profession was being used as a scapegoat of sorts to divert attention from government officials who should have caught the terrorists before they struck.

Even if a band of terrorists did gain access to a crop-duster, which both Addison feel is unlikely, they would probably have difficulty handling the airplane.

"A green pilot would be lucky to get it off the ground," Wes Addison said. "He'd probably

wipe it out."

Wes Addison said he has had experienced jetliner pilots tell him that even they would have trouble flying the ungainly machines.

"They would have to know how to handle that type of plane, it's not like a regular passenger plane," said Lynette McCormick of McCormick Spraying Service in a phone interview Tuesday.

Many in the government and the general public say they worry someone may rent one of these machines and use it to commit mischief, Addison said that's not likely to happen either.

"We rarely rent them to anybody we don't know," Clint Addison said. "We have rented them to people in different parts of Texas who were an airplane short ... but we knew who we were renting them to."

Clint also said that with a price tag of \$300,000 each, you don't loan them out to just anybody ... I wouldn't even consider leasing an airplane to somebody I didn't know."

Wes Addison also said the recent attention focused on crop-dusters had put his industry, which is usually in the background for most members of the public, in a bad light and made them afraid for nothing.

"(It) was just the media hyping it up and scaring people," Addison said, citing an example of a newscaster telling his audience that a single crop-duster could wipe out the entire East Coast. Addison said such claims are probably groundless.

Whether there ever was a threat, Addison said he is just glad to be flying again and climbed back into his airplane and soared off.

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