

Aviators in the USA are struggling to complete their certifications amid a broken pilot examination system – but can the nation’s regulator fix it at a time of such soaring demand?

Blank checkride

Pilar Wolfsteller Las Vegas

It takes a lot of effort to become a pilot. For some aspiring aviators, acquiring the practical skills in the cockpit might be the biggest challenge, while for others, it is finding a way to pay for training. The regulatory paperwork and clunky government websites can also be a burden.

But many candidates find that even more difficult than mastering the art of operating an aircraft or filling out the complicated online forms correctly is finding a pilot examiner in a useful amount of time.

The US Federal Aviation Administration’s (FAA’s) notoriously strained resources and well-documented staff shortages have created a serious bottleneck to pilot production at a time when US airlines are hiring record numbers of cockpit crew. As the industry scrambles to find more efficient ways to push more candidates through flight training, there are concerning deficits in the oversight of exams and those who administer them.

Growth spurt

“Aviation is currently in high-growth mode, it’s at max thrust,” says Paul Preidecker, president of the National Association of Flight Instructors. “There’s a lot of training going on, and a lot of demand. And when the system is under pressure, that’s when you start to see the weaknesses.”

Central to every would-be pilot’s qualification journey are regular assessments, also called checkrides:

rites of passage that lead a candidate from one certificate to the next. A checkride – consisting of an oral exam and a practical (flying) portion – can last anywhere between a few hours for a private pilot licence, and the better part of a day for a certified flight instructor certification.

Almost all exams – 98% – are conducted by experienced pilots selected and vetted by the FAA, called designated pilot examiners (DPEs), rather than the FAA’s own employees.

Not only is the industry desperate for pilots, but DPEs and their FAA supervisors – called aviation safety inspectors – are exceedingly scarce in this current hot market. Too often, pilot candidates must wait between several weeks to several months for an appointment to sit their checkrides.

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There is a shortage of designated pilot examiners to assess trainees

Textron Aviation

“There are clearly not enough examiners,” Preidecker says. But the reasons for that shortage are complex, and the solutions are not straightforward. “In aviation we always strive for the black and white, but this question lives in the grey areas.”

David St. George, executive director of the Society of Aviation and Flight Educators and himself a longtime DPE, concurs. “We’re not optimising the use of our DPEs and that’s creating a problem.”

The FAA’s website lists 1,139 DPEs qualified to conduct fixed-wing checkrides. But numerous entries are duplicates, and others are outdated or otherwise inaccurate. Industry insiders estimate the actual number is 800-900.

Uneven workload

In addition, DPEs’ geographical distribution and their workloads are wildly uneven. According to flight training experts, about 40% of designees do less than 20 tests per year, while others – for whom testing is their full-time job – will do up to three every day.

The US regulator does not publish the number of checkrides conducted every year. But inferring from its publicly available airman certification statistics, the number of fixed-wing pilot exams conducted nationwide last year was likely over 200,000.

DPEs are assigned to one of the FAA’s 77 Flight Standards District Offices (FSDOs). Each FSDO is operated “like a fiefdom or medieval village”, says one examiner, with its own rules, regulations and business practices.

The shortage of examiners is particularly acute in the southwestern USA – California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah – where flight training volume is high due to mostly favourable climate conditions allowing for year-round instruction. For some candidates, the nearest DPE is 250 miles (400km) away.

Currently, the Oakland FSDO – responsible for a large swath of coastal northern California stretching from San Francisco to Oregon – shows just two examiners qualified to evaluate airplane pilot candidates. Neighbouring San Jose FSDO, which covers western California from the Bay Area south to near Bakersfield, lists only three.

The Las Vegas FSDO includes a vast area of east-central California, southern Nevada and northern Arizona, and has just seven designees.

Flight school representatives say that is frustrating.

“It’s very difficult to get a [checkride] date locked in,” says Stefanie Hott, flight training advisor at All In Aviation, a Las Vegas-based flight school. The wait time for students can be six weeks, she says. Add weather, illness, or aircraft maintenance requirements into the mix, and those six weeks can quickly turn into a few months.

That said, the FAA notes that up to 25% of tests are over before they begin – and thus require a new appointment – because candidates arrive inadequately prepared, missing paperwork, lacking required experience or presenting incorrect instructor endorsements.

“It would be nice if the FAA had a streamlined system to book checkrides,” Hott says. “It would also be helpful if all DPEs could do more ratings.”

Those suggestions are also on the wish list of general aviation advocacy group Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), which says it is “working directly with the FAA” on designee system reform.

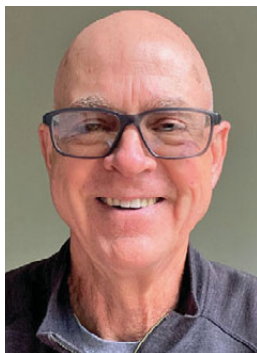
The FAA did not respond to several requests for comment, information or data. The agency says only that it is taking “concrete steps to speed up certification applications”, without further explanation.

“The agency is committed to adding designated pilot examiners in the coming months and is reprioritising work to address a significant portion of pending applications by the end of fiscal year 2023,” it adds.

That prioritisation seems desperately needed.

John Ewing, a flight instructor and former DPE, first applied to become an examiner in 2008. He was called for an initial interview eight years later. The multi-step process to qualify, including online and

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John Ewing

John Ewing Flight instructor and former DPE

in-person courses, proficiency flight training and observation, took about six months, and significant financial investment.

When he started in 2017, Ewing was one of the busiest DPEs in his district, conducting up to seven checkrides every week in addition to teaching and charter pilot jobs. He later scaled down to about four weekly.

“Being a DPE is hard,” he says. “It’s a difficult and trying job, and it can wear you down.”

Ewing voluntarily returned his designation earlier this year.

“I’ve had applicants who didn’t pay or disputed payments, complained about the cost, complained the test took too long. If an applicant is dissatisfied, they might try to take civil action against an examiner and examiners don’t have any explicit immunity from that,” he says.

He describes the DPE role as “like a contractor without a contract”. The FAA can designate someone, and can terminate their approval with or without cause, with or without notice. That job insecurity puts off many potential candidates.

Ewing’s account tracks with other reports of poor management at the FAA, sometimes described as an “old boys club”, where favouritism influences career paths – and examiner designations.



Staffing levels are a problem across the industry, including for flight schools

A source with FAA experience calls the agency “dysfunctional” and “toxic” – and that inevitably leads to high employee turnover. Better-paid, lower-stress jobs in private industry often prove more appealing.

“I had five managers in five years,” Ewing says. “Some of them were good, some not so much. DPEs are supposed to have at least one checkride observed every year. I once went three years without an observation.”

“If you have a question or an issue, you’re often left on your own to use your best judgment to try to research and resolve it,” he adds. “That’s a pretty alarming state of affairs.”

A request to the FAA for comment on this specific statement went unanswered.

But there are exceptions. “I personally am in a wonderful FSDO that has supported me very generously over the 25 years I’ve been a DPE,” says St. George.

Team support

Another examiner adds: “If you have a well-staffed FSDO, and a responsive manager, it can make all the difference between whether your job is doable, and you feel supported and part of a team, or you’re out in the woods rubbing two sticks together trying to make a fire.”

And it always comes down to staffing.

"You can't have a conversation with anybody about aviation without talking about the shortage of something," Preidecker says. "The pilot shortage, the shortage of avionics technicians, shortage of air traffic controllers. You name the position, there's a shortage of them."

"It's the same in the FAA. The FAA has a shortage of people who should be overseeing that designee management system," he says. If more designees were added (an estimated 1,000 DPE applications are pending – some for more than a year), the FAA "wouldn't have the ability to monitor their activities".

Though the FAA's airman certification standards (ACS) clearly outline the knowledge, skill and risk management requirements for every checkride, that monitoring is vital. Instructors complain about irregular ACS implementation, and even examiners admit that day-to-day execution can be inconsistent.

"There is no uniformity among the examiners," says an instructor from Arizona who requested anonymity. "I try to train every possible thing to prepare a student but sometimes an examiner likes to throw a wild curve ball. Some take issue if things aren't done their way."

"The standards are spelled out in the ACS, but this is where more FAA oversight is required," says Preidecker. "We need more guidance without more regulation. Nobody wants to be micromanaged. On the other hand, if I have no guidance, I'll have no standards."

Inconsistent approach

For the moment, with the nearly-thousand DPEs come "a thousand different FAAs", adds Ewing. Some examiners are sticklers for detail, while others cut corners to squeeze in even more checkrides.

With the FAA's oversight abilities stretched so thin, lapses do happen.

"The scary part of the DPE shortage is that people are doing what might be less-than-safe reviews," St.

reimbursement of expenses appear common. These high-volume "pilot mills" promise DPEs an endless stream of candidates (and income) in a short period of time. That leaves students at smaller schools facing even longer delays, and even more expense.

"I've heard those rumours," Ewing says. "When any examiner starts getting in bed with a large flight school with these kinds of arrangements, I think that's a slippery slope."

Experts agree that the problems are systemic, and they blame the FAA's leadership deficiencies. Three of the last four administrators – including the current office-holder Polly Trottenberg and her direct predecessor Billy Nolen – have been in the role on an "acting", unconfirmed basis.

As a result, the FAA's managers tend to be very risk-averse, unwilling to take responsibility, or make and stand by tough decisions.



Polly Trottenberg is the latest FAA leader with acting administrator title

Lev Radny/Pacific Press/Shutterstock

\$2,000

Potential cost of a checkride to examinees, depending on the rating they are seeking and the degree of demand

George says. "I've talked to applicants whose oral [test] on their multi-engine checkride was 12 minutes long. That's not even enough time to ensure that the aircraft is airworthy."

It is no secret that flight training is expensive, and DPE-conducted checkrides add to that expense to the tune of \$700-\$2,000 per test, depending on the rating and the market. So for the full-time DPE, the more demand there is, the more lucrative the job becomes.

AOPA says it has heard of fees it calls "outrageous", and has raised the issue with the FAA. But in this instance, the regulator has chosen not to regulate.

It does not take much digging to find social media posts asserting that large flight schools use their financial might to attract DPEs who want to travel. Above-market payment, cash bonuses, plus generous

The fix, sources say, must start at the top.

AOPA has made recommendations to the agency which include removing DPEs who are "not fully supporting local needs or performing enough checkrides to warrant them taking a DPE position", shortening the process from selection to approval, and transferring oversight to a centralised national-level office.

Some relief could come in 2025. The FAA Reauthorization Act currently winding its way through the US Congress pledges improvement.

It calls on the FAA to establish "national co-ordination and oversight of designated pilot examiners", standardise policy, guidance and regulations, and develop a code of conduct for examiners. In addition, it requires the FAA to enable pilot candidates to schedule their checkrides "not more than 14 calendar days after requested".

Those proposals would ease some of the burden on future pilots, but it is highly doubtful the regulator will have its staffing issues sorted by then.

In the meantime, the US pilot shortage continues.

"The FAA doesn't have enough people, consequently, we don't have enough DPEs, and at the same time we're just minting pilots like you wouldn't believe," says St. George.

"It's sort of the perfect storm." ▮