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Federal, SC aviation officials seek to crack down on illegal charter flights

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A licensed charter plane is parked at Charleston International Airport. Federal aviation officials are trying to crack down on illegal charter flights that don't go through the same inspections and training as licensed charter operators. Andrew Brown/Staff

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Federal aviation officials are on the hunt for illegal charter operators that use private aircraft for commercial use, skirting regulations and risking the safety of wealthy passengers flying to and from South Carolina.

Officials from the Federal Aviation Administration and the S.C. Aeronautics Commission held a meeting in North Charleston last month to raise awareness about illegal charter flights and the risks they pose.

The meeting was part of a larger national effort to crack down on back-room operations that offer commercial flights while ignoring federal standards that are in place to maintain safety in the sky.

Legitimate charter operators offer direct flights on smaller jets and propeller-driven planes to a select group of clients willing to pay to skip commercial airport lines, overhead luggage bins and cramped seating.

In order to do that, charter companies need to meet strict requirements for aircraft maintenance. Their pilots need to go through advanced training. And the businesses often must carry millions of dollars in insurance coverage.

According to the FAA, 21 licensed air charter businesses are operating in South Carolina from the Upstate to the Lowcountry. It's a niche industry focused on serving business clients traveling for work and wealthy individuals looking to fly in luxury to their next vacation.

Federal aviation officials are increasingly concerned, however, about less scrupulous companies that pop up, offering to supply planes and pilots to travelers without meeting the heightened safety standards.

"Illegal charter operations pose a serious safety hazard to the traveling public, and the FAA works aggressively to identify and shut down rogue operators," the agency said in a statement.

Federal officials have pursued enforcement actions nationwide against at least dozens of pilots, operators or other people associated with illegal charters, according to the agency.

Two FAA attorneys at the the recent meeting in North Charleston cited a recent case the agency brought against a company that was flying people into and out of the oil fields of Texas.

“When we find these illegal charters, we often don’t find the best trained pilots and the most airworthy aircraft,” said Aaron Robinson, one of the attorneys who handled the case.

Randy Deberry, the manager of the FAA’s flight standards office in South Carolina, said the agency is working to weed out illegal operations in the Palmetto State, too.

That’s welcome news to people like Jeremy Bass, the CEO of Executive HeliJet, a charter company that operates out of Myrtle Beach. He called South Carolina a “cesspool” of unlicensed operators.

Bass and several other owners of registered charter companies took part in the panel discussion in North Charleston.

The illegal operators hurt the licensed charter companies’ profits, cutting into the limited number of customers who can afford to charter a plane to Atlanta, Charlotte or the Bahamas. As a result, several operators are hoping to convince state lawmakers to pass a law to place criminal penalties on people who run illegal charter operations in South Carolina.

“We’re pulling back the very first layer of a massive onion,” Bass said. “We have to engage rulemakers, lawmakers and people who are in positions of authority.”

The illegal charters can offer cheaper prices to people because they don’t have to pay for all of the costs required to be certified by the FAA.

For instance, they don’t have to replace parts on the aircraft as frequently. The pilots they use don’t have to train in a simulator every year to prepare for possible engine failures, electrical malfunctions and cabin decompression. And they don’t pay taxes on the profits they make from the flights.

“The problem we have from a financial point of view is competing with illegal operators because they don’t have any overhead,” said Gary Davis, the owner of Davis Air, a licensed charter company based in Charleston. “They don’t have to follow the rules that we have to follow.”

The unfair business competition can hurt the viability of licensed charter companies. But what the licensed operators fear even more, they said, is the industry getting a bad name because of illegal charter flights crashing and killing passengers.

“When things happen and illegal charters crash — which we’ve had — it impacts the perception of the flying public,” said former Boeing Co. executive Marco Cavozzoni, a member of the state Aeronautics Commission and the owner of Lowcountry Aviation Co., a charter operator in Walterboro.

“When it comes to aviation safety, we’re all in the same business,” he said. “When people stop flying, it impacts us all.”

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