

Making Sense of the Third-Class Medical

I'M REALLY EXCITED THAT EAA and AOPA have created a proposal that can actually enhance the safety benefits of the third-class medical certificate while unburdening many pilots from the requirement to obtain a third-class medical.

The objectives of FAA medical certification are worthy because it's important that pilots be aware of how health issues can affect their flying safety. But the traditional system of visiting an aviation medical examiner (AME) every couple of years to renew a third-class medical certificate doesn't ensure safety. And it's expensive. We estimate pilots spend \$250 million on third-class medical certification over 10 years, and the FAA spends about \$11 million.

If you think for a moment about how the medical certification system works, we pilots are the ones who determine that we are fit to fly on any given day. One day every two years, or longer for younger pilots, an AME passes judgment on your fitness to fly. Then for the next 729 days you must determine that you're ready to fly. But the FAA gives us no information on how to make an informed decision on our readiness for flight.

That's why the EAA and AOPA request for exemption can build on the medical certification system and make it better and safer. Pilots will study an online course to learn what the important health issues are and how to identify your fitness for flight. And, of course, there will be a test following the course to make sure you understand the material. A valid driver's license will confirm you meet the basic standards to operate an aircraft.

EAA and others have made requests for exemptions from the third-class medical in the past, and all have been denied. But I believe this time we have a chance of the FAA accepting the request because the third-class medical is being replaced by a health training program that promises to actually advance pilot understanding and awareness and thus improve safety.

We also have more than five years of safety data from the sport pilot community where pilots flying light-sport aircraft with a driver's license medical standard have had zero accidents caused by health or medical issues.

EAA and AOPA have crafted the petition around the standards of recreational flying that are already in the rules. That means if the request is accepted pilots will be able to fly VFR during the day in fixed-gear, piston singles that have engines of 180 hp or less. The airplane can have as many as four seats, but only one passenger could be carried.

I know that any definition of recreational flying will leave some pilots out because their airplane has higher horsepower or retractable landing gear or more seats, but our best chance of success is to build on an existing definition already in the rules. We have to walk before we can run, and if the safety record of pilots flying recreationally under the proposed exemption is as good as I



AOPA and EAA presidents Craig Fuller and Rod Hightower unveiled the petition for the third-class medical exemption at AOPA's Expo.

expect, we may have a chance to broaden the scope in the future.

Another reason—perhaps the most important—that I believe the FAA will act favorably on our request for the exemption is that EAA and AOPA are united. Together our organizations include close to half a million members who are the huge majority of all pilots. The medical advisory boards of both associations are working together to craft recommendations for the medical training program. And I am in regular contact with Craig Fuller at AOPA. The cooperation between the two largest pilot groups is unprecedented, and I believe will cause the FAA to pay close attention to our proposal.

The actual petition for exemption will be submitted jointly by EAA and AOPA in early 2012. The FAA will then open a formal period for comments, and that's where you come in. We'll let you know when and how to comment on the proposal, and thoughtful remarks from you, actual pilots, will carry a lot of weight with the FAA. I'll keep you posted on when and how to act.

Now let's go aviate. *EAA*