

Allegiant Air flight runs low on fuel over closed airport, makes emergency landing

William R. Levesque, Tampa Bay Times | JUL 27, 2015

An Allegiant Air flight ran dangerously low on fuel last week as it circled an airport in North Dakota that was actually closed so the Navy's Blue Angels could practice for a forthcoming air show.

The pilot told the tower on Thursday that he didn't have enough fuel to make it to a back-up airport, so he was forced to declare an emergency to clear airspace for a landing at Fargo's Hector International Airport, according to a recording of air traffic between the pilot and tower available on the website LiveATC.net.

At one point, an air traffic controller rebuked the airline for its apparent ignorance of the airport closing, which the Federal Aviation Administration provides notice of far in advance.

"Your company ... should have been aware of this for a number of months," the controller said.

The incident involving Flight 426 is the latest and perhaps strangest in a string of emergency landings for the budget airline during June and July, including three at St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport. The Pinellas County airport is one of Allegiant's busiest hubs with about 95 percent of the passenger traffic there carried by the airline. Pinellas tourism officials have credited the Las Vegas-based airline, which flies to a number of underserved midsized cities, with boosting local tourism.

Allegiant officials Monday confirmed a pilot declared a fuel emergency at the Fargo airport but offered few details. The FAA said it is looking into the incident.

If the aircraft had landed at its scheduled time, it would have arrived 12 minutes before the airport was closed five hours for the Blue Angels practice session, the airline schedule and notice of the FAA airport closing shows. But the flight's departure out of Las Vegas was delayed by more than an hour.

That delay guaranteed the flight could not make Fargo before it closed at noon central time. But the Allegiant pilot inexplicably continued to that destination.

The pilot contacted the Fargo tower a little before 1 p.m., the tape shows, to tell air traffic control that Allegiant had been trying to get in touch with airport officials, apparently by telephone.

"We don't have ... enough fuel to go anywhere else," the pilot told the Fargo tower. "And our guys are trying to get in touch with the tower manager right now to coordinate our landing or I'm going to have to declare an emergency and come in and land."

The Fargo tower gave the pilot a phone number to try, and then told him the airspace would be clear enough to land if he could wait another 20 minutes.

"Yeah, I don't have 20 minutes," the pilot said.

The tower then recommended another airport 70 miles to the north, the recording shows.

"Yeah, listen, we're bingo fuel here in about probably three to four minutes and I got to come in and land," the pilot said.

"Bingo fuel" is a military term meaning the pilot doesn't have enough fuel for anything but returning to base and cannot continue on a mission.

The tower told the Allegiant flight the only way he could get permission to land at the closed airport was to contact the Minneapolis air traffic center to declare an emergency.

"Okay," the pilot said. "I am going to give them another three minutes. ... I'll see if we can get this coordinated."

The tower then told the pilot his airline should have known about the closing. The pilot, sounding a bit flustered, responded, "Okay. Yeah. Just, ah — We'll follow up on that."

The aircraft made a safe landing shortly after 1 p.m. The Blue Angels could not be reached to comment. Fargo airport manager Shawn Dobberstein confirmed the emergency landing but said he knew no detail. Allegiant officials did not say if they were aware of the airport closing, nor why the flight continued to Fargo after its takeoff was delayed.

The airline could not immediately say how many passengers were on the flight.

"At this time, we are coordinating with the FAA and the airport to investigate all channels of communication regarding the flight and the circumstances leading to the declaration of emergency," the airline said in a written statement.

John Cox, a St. Petersburg resident who is a former U.S. Airways pilot and a former safety official at the Air Line Pilots Association, said it is very rare for a commercial pilot to declare a fuel emergency. In more than 45 years as a pilot, Cox said he never had to do so.

He said commercial aircraft are not required to carry enough fuel to make it to an alternative airport as long as the weather is good and an airport has more than one open runway. The weather at the Fargo airport, which has more than one runway, was good when the aircraft landed.

But all aircraft are required by the FAA, Cox said, to carry a 45-minute fuel reserve.

Cox said an airline's dispatch office and the pilot have a responsibility to know if an aircraft's destination is open or closed. The FAA provides notice of such closings.

"The pilot's going to get to answer some interesting questions from the FAA," Cox said.

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