

Airport Operations Team Make For Smooth Flying

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You may not think to wonder what goes on behind the scenes to make an airport run, but there are many professional practices in place that mean we can all take our safe travel for granted. At Red Deer Airport, the operations team consists of three multi-talented men: Operations Manager Leonard Weiss, Senior Operations Specialist Dale Voight and Operations Specialist Allen McGillivray. Whether it's the development and implementation of safety plans, regular maintenance of the grounds and equipment, de-icing planes or wildlife control, their days are busy and varied.

"We follow standards set by Transport Canada regarding wildlife, perimeter checks of the airport and maintenance," said Weiss. "We are also required to submit our safety plans to Transport Canada, though we create the plans here so they are specific to our airport."

While it's easy to imagine the damage a bird can do to a plane, Weiss says other wildlife can be as big an issue at an airport. Any animal on a runway can be hazardous to a plane that is landing or taking off, and so Weiss and his crew use two gas cannons that fire randomly to frighten away wildlife such as deer and coyotes. They also use a screecher, which mimics a variety of bird distress calls that warn birds away from the airport lands.

Weiss and his crew's careful maintenance of the grass on 150 acres of the airport's 900 acres is about more than just keeping the airport looking shipshape. "It's important to keep the grass short because long grass attracts mice," Weiss explained. "Mice then attract the birds and coyotes. As well, we also get small saplings coming up along the edge of runways, and we have to keep those trimmed down so the deer aren't drawn to the buds."

For such extensive grounds, the grass maintenance is a never-ending cycle every summer. As well, the operations crew takes care of sealing cracks on the runways and aprons, vehicle maintenance, weekly perimeter checks of the fencing to meet Transport Canada standards and ensure wildlife are kept out, and repainting the lines on the runways.

Each winter, the task of runway clearing becomes central to the operations team. Because flights at Red Deer Airport operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Weiss and his team are on call; whenever it snows they are out immediately afterward, ploughing and then sweeping the runways. If they know freezing rain is coming, they apply sodium acetate ahead of time so the rain doesn't stick to the runway surfaces. The operations team also conducts regular runway friction tests – braking on the runways to check stopping times and the impact of any debris or weather conditions.

“We get medivacs, so it's important to keep it open and safe at all times,” Weiss said. “Planes slide more on ice than cars do, so they need a good stopping surface. If we can get at it right away, we can get it bare and dry without chemicals, but we also use chemicals sometimes, such as in freezing rain conditions.” He notes they cannot use any abrasive like gravel on the runways, because it can damage a plane's props.

Nav Canada, which operates Canada's civil air service across the country, requires a runway report submitted to them every 24 hours and every time the weather changes. Weiss and his team take care of that, as well as tracking and reporting all flights to Transport Canada, from local ones to those that require a flight assessment plan. Not only that, every act of vehicle maintenance, from oil changes to tires, must also be in compliance with Transport Canada.

Weiss, Voight and McGillivray all hold Canadian Aeronautical Radio licenses, so that they are able to speak the same language as pilots; they also hold airside vehicle operator's permits and Class 3 licenses with airbrakes, and take required courses every year in de-icing planes and other seasonal refresher courses. Their new capability to de-ice planes for the past year has already been needed a handful of times, to the benefit of travelers.

Airport operations range even further than what has been described here to include the maintenance of the air terminal, escorting medivacs and limousines containing celebrities, all the way to development of an emergency response plan. Weiss is understandably proud of the diverse abilities of the airport operations group. “We wear a lot of different hats and it's a really great team,” he said.

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