



## **MetFlight GA is free again. That's one small step back to safer flying**

From July 1, MetFlight GA is publicly funded – just like mountain and marine forecasts.

This decision, buried in the 2015 Budget, brings to an end a GA-wide campaign of protest. It finally acknowledges that weather information for general aviators is for the benefit of people aloft and those on the ground, and must never be subject to the “user pays” mantra.

The GAA was among the first to raise a protest against charges, and the only interest group to conduct a supporter poll on the issue. That survey indicated the use of MetFlight GA had plummeted since charges were introduced. Before subscription was imposed, about 80% of aviators regularly consulted MetFlight GA. That fell to about 14% afterwards.

MetFlight GA subscriptions never numbered much more than 500, according to official figures supplied to the GAA.

MetService told the GAA that it was not possible to remove the fee because MetFlight GA costs had to be recovered under its mandate as a State-owned Enterprise, following the cessation of the CAA subsidy that previously supported the forecasts.

It is also worth remembering the words of former Minister of Transport Gerry Brownlee, who – in attempting to answer our question: “Why should private pilots pay for safety information, when boaties, climbers and trampers do not?” – stated that private pilots were identifiable while the others were not, and that his administration had no plans to change the policy.

CAA Director Graeme Harris was never happy with the charging policy and told us so. We now know that he worked very quietly behind the scenes to find an alternative. He told GAA: “We have been lobbying hard for this for some time and knew that a favourable outcome was close, but couldn't say much due to the secrecy around the Budget process.”

Also uncomfortable was Airways Corporation – and this profit-directed SOE probably also played a role in achieving a just solution.

For their contributions, they've earned the gratitude of all Kiwi aviators. Credit is also due to all those anonymous folk who provided supporting evidence in the GAA poll, and to the organisations which defend and promote general aviation in New Zealand and strove to achieve this result.

While the wheels of bureaucracy ground slowly on in the offices of MetService, the MoT, the CAA and Airways, tech-savvy general aviators in this country discovered that MetFlight was actually becoming slightly less essential. EFB users found they could download quite accurate local weather and apply it to their low-level flight plans using data from Australia, derived from information supplied by MetService! Purists might insist on interpreting old-fashioned wind charts, but [windyty.com](http://windyty.com) had overtaken all that by supplying real-time actual winds and reliable forecasts in an instantly recognisable format. And you could get it on a mobile phone.

The Budget decision means that low-level aviators in New Zealand will no longer be forced to pay in excess of \$100 a year for MetService aviation forecasts. Although the cut-off date for a paid service is July 1, technical issues may delay full introduction of the free service.

Alongside this runs the promised introduction of a simpler, graphics-based SIGMET.

GAA supporters took a leading role in mocking the arrival of ICAO-dictated SIGMETs, which removed familiar geographical locations and replaced them with references to Lats and Longs.

The CAA seems happy (whenever it suits) to use ICAO "global" decisions as an excuse for imposing changes that sometimes inadvertently and adversely impact on New Zealand's general aviators (while ignoring the option to adopt the accepted ICAO policy of local, State-based member decisions that are accepted as "exceptions", such as the one imposed by Canada that introduced a two-level system of SIGMET – one for international, IFR-based transport, and the other for local operators).

Many aviators also find the CAA's apparent resistance to plain English GA forecasts somewhat puzzling. Even more bizarre is the fact that a private individual makes such forecasts available in this country. It's to be hoped that, in re-introducing a free MetFlight GA service, MetService does not break Ian Boag's PEMET.

Ultimately, the new MetFlight service should return to its rightful place on the Airways IFIS website. This would provide a one-click solution for NOTAMs and weather information – something that contributors to the GAA poll last year overwhelmingly supported.

In the meantime, claims that one New Zealand aviation organisation or another has achieved a victory in returning MetFlight GA to a free service should be treated with some scepticism. This was not a victory to be claimed by the GAA, AOPA, RAANZ, SAA, Flying NZ or Gliding NZ.

Rather, it was the overdue triumph of common sense over commercial obduracy and political dogma, assisted in large part by many individuals – some of them public servants – who knew all along that the idea of charging private pilots for aviation weather information was unacceptable, unsustainable and unsafe.