



No More Fueling Around *How to Keep Your Fuel Tanks From Going Hungry*

I can remember my first fuel starvation incident like it was yesterday. Having just moved to Texas, I was excited about attending my first big rodeo. Front row tickets to boot! After packing my newly purchased snakeskin boots and bolo tie, I did a quick weather check, kicked the tires, and was off. Given my state of excitement, and of course the fact that I was running late, I completely blew off the low fuel warnings I was receiving on my panel. The indicator might as well have reached out and slapped me in the face, and I think I would still have pressed on. Then it happened: the blood-curdling sound of an engine sputtering its last breath before falling completely silent.

I froze. This couldn't be happening. I was almost there. Then, after mustering up a reserve of inner strength and without so much as a glance at a checklist, I knew exactly what I needed to do. I opened the door, grabbed the empty fuel container from my trunk, and hoofed it to the nearest gas station.

Oh, sorry, did you think I was in an airplane? If I had been, you can bet the ending to my story would have been quite different. In this case, it was a terrestrial error, with the only negative consequence being the long, hot, walk of shame along the highway

shoulder to the gas station, plus missing what would later become my favorite rodeo event, the chuck wagon races.

Unfortunately, this scenario is not all that different from the self-induced predicament some pilots have experienced, only they didn't have the luxury of being able to pull off on the shoulder, park, and walk somewhere for fuel. According to the latest Joseph T. Nall report (produced by AOPA's Air Safety Institute), 89 accidents occurred in 2010 as a result of fuel exhaustion; 11 of them fatal. And despite a decline in fuel management accidents through 2008, more recently those numbers have been reversing, accounting for eight percent of all accidents in 2010. According to the Nall report, inadequate flight planning — failure to determine the amount of fuel required for the flight or the amount actually on board, or to verify the rate of fuel consumption en route — accounted for the largest share (48 percent). Errors in operating the aircraft's fuel system (choosing an empty tank or the incorrect use of boost or transfer pumps) were almost as widespread, and were implicated in 43 percent of the total.

Another interesting statistic from the report showed that a quarter of fuel-management accidents took place at night; almost three times the number seen in other accident categories. That reeks of get-home-itis if you ask me.

Almost all fuel management accidents boil down to a lack of planning and/or poor decision making. Common examples include not accounting for a stronger-than-expected en route headwind, trying to squeeze out that extra bit of mileage to get to an airport with cheaper fuel prices, or perhaps trying to save face with a passenger who may be a bit perturbed to set down at a strange airport.

One of the more head-scratching aspects of fuel management accidents is simply how easy they are to prevent, as well as recognize well before they happen. Blaming a bad fuel gauge doesn't cut it. To prevent getting into this situation, try applying some of these tips before your next flight:

- Check your fuel before you go. It seems simple, but you'd be surprised how many pilots skip this important step during preflight.
- Budget extra time for an extra fuel stop or to



make an unexpected landing. A good rule of thumb is to try and land with no less than an hour of fuel left. That way you exceed what's required by the regulations.

- Even if you have an electronic fuel totalizer, know your burn rate — then add a gallon or two to that rate for good measure. That tip is especially pertinent if you are flying an unfamiliar aircraft.
- If you do get low on fuel, don't be afraid to declare an emergency. Too often, pilots fear paperwork or the embarrassment of admitting an error instead of getting ATC's full attention to help get to a fuel pump as quickly as possible.

Following these simple steps is a sure-fire way to prevent you from getting caught "fueling around."

Tom Hoffmann is the managing editor of the FAA Safety Briefing. He is a commercial pilot and holds an A&P certificate.

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