



Builder Assist Programs

Why the FAA's new 51% rule could mean a brighter future for GA.

Mikael Via,
President, Glasair Aviation

FA: Recently, the FAA released its much anticipated revision of the amateur-built aircraft certification policy, commonly known as the 51% rule. Are you pleased with the final product?

MV: Generally, I am. More importantly, I think this new revision could become one of the most significant pieces of paperwork to come out of the FAA in some time.

FA: How so?

MV: It cleans up the ambiguities and uncertainty in the FAA's policy regarding the 51% rule and will allow new pilots and non-homebuilders to take advantage of the excellent value equation offered in leading amateur-built aircraft. Bottom line: You'll see a huge surge of experimental aircraft in the marketplace.

FA: Why do you think we'll see a lot more experimental aircraft?

MV: Historically, kit aircraft builders did not have easy access to documentation, which clearly defined the scope of commercial assistance that could legitimately be provided for a particular aircraft model. As a result, exactly which tasks were required to be performed by the builder to satisfy the rule versus those which could be performed by a commercial assistance provider were virtually

unknown. Thus, obtaining commercial assistance was done at your own risk — and could result in a very expensive aircraft that would not receive an airworthiness certificate. The revised documents and policies go a long way toward resolving these ambiguities.

FA: You mention commercial assistance for amateur builders. Do you think that's the area where we'll see more growth in the experimental category?

MV: Absolutely. There are a number of companies already providing commercial assistance, and with the new 51% rule, I think you'll see a lot more — and not just for what we typically think of as the traditional "amateur-built" aircraft, but some very sophisticated planes that offer a great value proposition.

FA: You launched "Two Weeks To Taxi" in 2005, which allows customers to come to your facility and work with your factory professionals to build a

Sportsman 2+2 in two weeks. Is that an example of the kind of builder assistance you're describing?

MV: Yes. For example, at our facility, customers typically complete their Sportsman in two weeks, fire it up and taxi out of the hangar. We supply the builder with

assistance from our own A&Ps who do all of the setup and cleanup, answer any and all questions, and make sure that the customer stays on track to build 51% of the airplane. Customers have instant access to knowledge, tools and procedures that have evolved and improved in the nearly four years we've been offering this type of program. In our program alone, to date we've assisted more than 100 customers in building their aircraft.

FA: Two weeks is pretty impressive. How long does it take to build a typical experimental aircraft without builder assistance?

MV: The length of time it takes to build an airplane, of course, varies as to the aircraft itself and the experience of the builder. But I'm told

EAA has figures that indicate the average time between the purchase of the kit or materials and the aircraft finally being completed and registered with the FAA is 12 years.

FA: Twelve years?

IW: Yes.

FA: Wow! But why do you think the new 51% rule will draw more people toward experimental aircraft?

MV: Two reasons. First is safety. A pilot who has built the aircraft knows his plane better than one he didn't build. He/she knows what's important for the safety of flight and is better

"...You'll see a huge surge of experimental aircraft in the marketplace."

educated to make go/no-go decisions with respect to the airplane. Second, experimental aircraft are a lot more bang for the buck than many certified airplanes. For example, our Sportsman is faster than a Cessna 182, outclimbs a 182, carries more payload than a 182, but costs about half as much. That's what general aviation really needs right now — safer pilots flying significantly less expensive aircraft.

FA: Ultimately, aren't there a limited number of people who would actually want to build an airplane?

MV: When you're talking only about those willing to build a plane in their garage over a 10- or 12-year period, heck, yes. But I think legitimate builder-assist programs change all that and bring in a whole new crowd of potential builders. Our "Two Weeks To Taxi" customers come from all over the world and all walks of life. We have guys who fly their corporate jets into our facility to take two weeks off for a once-in-a-lifetime experience of building their own airplane. Many of our customers state that they would never build an airplane on their own. With the FAA's policy on the 51% rule now clear, more and more pilots will take advantage of building their own airplanes. 



The Glasair Sportsman 2+2 is a popular example of the new experimental aircraft coming from builder-assistance programs.

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