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Ken Sorenson and Members
Chair, SSA Contest Committee

Gentlemen and Lady:

I'm writing about several concerns as a result of participating in the 15 meter national contest at Logan, Utah that recently concluded.

I ask that the Contest Committee my comments and suggestions as part of its annual process of rule review. My comments relate to (1) site selection criteria for national contests, (2) how to address unforeseen weather or other conditions that render a contest day unfair, and (3) how to deal with the issues generated by independent commentary on the conduct of contests.

Some brief background is relevant to put my comments into context. I have flown in many regional contests and three prior national contests. I have placed in the top one-third or better in each. Prior to the Logan contest, my last national contest was the 2010 18-meter nationals, where I placed 7th (actually 8th when a foreign pilot was counted). Lest my comments be read as those of a flat-land pilot (I'm from Chicago), I should note that I have flown over 550 hours cross-country in the French Alps over more than ten years. Those mountains are more "technical" and land-out options even more limited than those at the Logan contest. I like to fly in mountains and am comfortable doing so. Nonetheless, I withdrew from the Logan contest after flying four contest days because I thought the tasking was much too aggressive for the weather and did not present circumstances where I could comfortably compete.

Here are my specific concerns.

Site selection and tasking.

The general issue presented is how new sites are reviewed for national contests and whether the review criteria include important considerations that seemed to be absent in selecting Logan.

I thought the Logan area failed to meet reasonable requirements for a national contest site for several reasons:

- (a) Logan airport is located in a valley at 4,500 MSL. The ridge to the east, where all contest days began, is at an 8,000-9,000 MSL. Tows were to

2,500 above airport elevation. As a result it took a long time to reach the top, especially when ballasted, and relights were more common than at any other contest I have flown.

- (b) No tasks were attempted while I was present that did not require the Logan ridge to work. As a result, there was only one route onto the contest course.
- (c) The day began very late. It required considerable time for the valley airmass to develop thermals that would take gliders to the top of the ridge. Launches normally began after 2 p.m. and contest starts were after 3 p.m. and often after 4 pm. Even though the day ran late, it was not possible to schedule more than 3 or 3-1/2 hour tasks, for the most part, on any day. Returns often required using the Logan ridge to get back to the airport.
- (d) Transitions to upwind and downwind ridges (more accurately, mountains), involved lengthy transitions up or down wind. The typical transitions were 18 to 28 miles. Some transitions involved flight over unlandable terrain.
- (e) Because of the terrain, local pilots had a significant advantage in implementing transitions and in knowledge of landable fields or areas that were not obvious. Tasking seemed to be largely in the hands of local pilots. I'm sure all acted in good faith and without any desire to benefit from local knowledge, but the result was not a level playing field.
- (f) Because of the nature of the site and weather issues (see below), although 9 contest days were flown, 5 were devalued and three resulted in eight or less finishers out of an initial field of 25 contestants. Several gliders were damaged in landouts.

These facts made the site highly questionable for a national contest. They made it downright unacceptable for a sports class regional, except for local pilots with extensive knowledge of the area. One of our Chicago Glider Club pilots, who is new to contest flying, came to Logan to fly in the sports class contest. After flying the area on several practice days he decided (correctly) that the site was well beyond his capabilities and left. He drove over 2,800 miles and incurred considerable expense for a contest that he did not know was well beyond his capabilities. At a time when I assume the goal if the Contest Committee is to expand the limited pool of contest pilots, this sort of experience discourages the newcomer.

One question presented by the selection of Logan for the 15 meter national contest is what sort of screening or evaluation is done of proposed sites for national contests when the site has not previously been used for such a contest. Perhaps Logan was the best or only option for the 2011 15 meter national contest. But if Logan was the best option, some disclosure to prospective contestants of the nature

of the site was in order. Such disclosure was certainly mandatory, in my view, for sports class regional contestants. If Logan was not the only alternative, then questions arise as to the adequacy of the screen process in site selection for such contests.

Before a new site is selected, I suggest that the Committee consider factors that include: (i) does the site require considerable local knowledge to fly safely or fast, (ii) when does the contest day begin and end, and is the time period adequate for a national contest where 3 hour tasks are the minimum and longer tasks often desirable, (iii) is there more than one route to reach the contest area, (iv) to what degree do typical tasks require flying over unlandable terrain, or terrain with very limited landout options, (v) if many tasks require such routing, what have the contest organizers done to advise the contestants, well in advance of the contest, of that fact and of typical transition routes and landout options.

Rule 2.7 addresses the issue generally, but provides no standards for site evaluation. Perhaps the appropriate place to implement these suggestions is in a revised Application for Sanction Form. See Rules 2.2 and 2.3. I've reviewed the SSA Site Selection and Development document, SSA SC08 08. Except for a mention of "off field landing options," it does not cover the issues listed above. The Application for Sanction form, SSA SC22f 10, addresses none of these issues. I suggest revising these documents. (If there is serious interest in my suggestion, I will volunteer to do a revised draft.)

Implementing the requirement that a contest day be "safe and "fair."

These comments relate to a rules issue not unique to the Logan contest: How to define a procedure, after a contest day is completed, to determine whether a day has ceased to be either safe or fair, and thus to eliminate the day from the contest.

The first day of the nationals resulted in five finishers (check) out of 25 contestants. Several well-ranked pilots landed out and left the contest. The mass landouts resulted from the movement of a cold front into the contest area ahead of forecast, resulting in widespread bands of thunderstorms and rain. Depending on where a pilot was as the bands sweep the area, he either had the opportunity to run under the shelf at good speed, or to have turnpoints blocked, or simply to be washed to the ground. I was not there for Day 5 where the same thing appears to have occurred (5 finishers) or Day 7 (4 finishers). I have seen the same situation occur at other contests.

A number of rules mention the importance of assuring contestants a fair or safe contest. See Rules 1.3, 2.1, 10.8.1.1, 10.8.1.2, 11.1.3; also A10.3.1. None provide standards for evaluation, and that is probably right since "fair" and "safe" involve considerable personal judgment. But I suggest that there is need for a rule that establishes procedures to require focusing on the fairness of the day after it is over when unexpected weather or other circumstances may mean that the day should

not count for purposes of the contest. At the Logan 15-meter nationals, two days seem to me to have qualified for a post-flight review. I suggest a rules change that calls for such a review under certain circumstances, but not to mandate any result or provide standards for the evaluation, other than the general standard of fairness.

It may be objected that the rules now permit an individual pilot to protest the day, and that is good enough to raise the issue of whether a day is fair. But such a protest is rarely going to be successful (I can't recall hearing of an example), and in any case is not fair to the contestants, since it puts a burden on the individual contestant that properly belongs to the management of the contest. Also, the contest community is small, and many of us fly with our friends. It is not realistic to think that many pilots will give priority to protesting a day when they were washed out, but a friend did well. There is an institutional bias against throwing out a day, especially in a contest where there may not be enough days to meet minimum requirements. And CDs may be reluctant to deprive finishers of their results at the request of a single unhappy contestant. For these reasons, the individual protest option is largely meaningless.

Instead of relying on individual protests, I suggest the following rule, tentatively numbered as new Rule 11.1.3.1, which is modeled on present Rule 10.8.1.2:

11.1.3.1. After the last contestant has landed, if less than one-third of contestants who started the task also completed the task, the CD shall consult, as soon as is practicable, with the task advisors and the contest meteorologist to consider whether the selected task ceased to be fair as a result of unforeseen circumstances, which may include, but need not be limited to, weather conditions. If after such consultation the CD concludes that the task was not fair because of such circumstances, he shall so advise the contestants and the day shall not be included in the contest results.

This is a purely procedural rule. It does not require anything other than a focus on the question of fairness and consultation by the CD with others on the subject. It would put in place a procedure that would move the issue from the individual protest level, where it does not belong, to the attention of the CD, who is ultimately responsible for the fairness of the contest. Sometimes simply asking the question may be enough to cause the CD to eliminate a day that was not fair.

“Free Speech” in the Contest Context.

My last area of concern relates to whether and to what extent the SSA should provide a forum for comments critical of contest management. This issue arises from the treatment of Frank Paynter at the Logan contest. But it may arise again and it presents a policy issue that should be decided by the Contest Committee or the SSA Board.

The facts, as you know, are that Frank has written a blog for most or all contests he attends (and he attends many), that discusses the tasks of the day and his opinions about various issues. They are interesting and well written. There is no doubt that he is expressing his own opinions and not those of the contest organizers. On July 23 Frank wrote a blog that was critical of tasking decisions on Day 3, and that (inaccurately) described one task as follows:

"All" we had to do was get to Sherman Peak, connect with the street, run it for 80 miles out over completely unlandable (and uninhabited) terrain, turn around and get home, and all but one 15m pilot was able to do this in some fashion or another. When I wasn't scared out of my gourd, it was actually quite spectacular! * * *

At dinner last night I was talking to my fellow CCSC club member John Lubon (JL) who is flying in the Region 9 FAI class, and discovered that he and the rest of the FAI class wound up flying the original 173 mile minimum task out to Thompson peak and back (the min distance task was essentially a 90-mile out-and-return). John said they were also flying over mostly unlandable terrain, but much more mountainous unlandable terrain than we had in the 15m task). However, it was very fortuitous that the cloud street over Sherman peak also extended east-northeast for 100 miles or so, so the FAI guys were able to run it out, nick the Thompson Peak circle 90 miles away, and then run home along the same street. If that street had not set up, there would have been FAI gliders strewn all over Idaho and Wyoming! As it was there were two landouts in this class, fortunately both at airports.

I flew the same task as Frank, and the terrain was not "completely unlandable," but was very rough and unlandable in many areas. As a result of his blog, the contest organizers ordered Frank off the SSA website for the contest. Frank acknowledged that his comments were an overstatement as regard "unlandability", but he felt (and I agree) that his statements captured the feelings of many pilots flying the task.

After a brouhaha arose on the web concerning removing Frank's blogs from the SSA website, Ken wrote a statement that circulated on the internet to the effect that the contest organizers controlled the content on the contest website at SSA.Org. Diane Black-Nixon added a comment that the SSA should not be held responsible for the actions of the contest organizers. In particular, Ken wrote:

There has never been any structure within the SSA to "manage" the reporters or the reporting — please remember that the SSA management of contests is done entirely by a small group of dedicated

volunteers, all of whom already have plenty to do without trying to manage contest reporters and reporting.

The contest organizers at the recent and ongoing Logan, UT contests have apparently elected to change reporters at the contest, which is within their authority to do. Frank Paynter's unofficial reports will continue to be available at www.soaringcafe.com. Please note that unofficial reports have been available previously from other reporters on personal blogs and other websites for this and other contests.

I don't agree that the issue can or should properly be resolved by saying its up to the contest organizers to decide who has access to the SSA website to express opinions about their management of the contest. The website, after all, does not belong to the contest or its organizers. It belongs to the SSA. The contest, in major ways, is also not theirs. The Rules provide hundreds of respects in which the SSA manages or controls the contest, as it should.

The SSA ought to have a policy, either created by the Contest Committee or the Board, to address the issue of posting opinion blogs and comments about contests on the SSA website. There are several alternatives positions warranting consideration:

One is Ken Sorenson's position – that the content of reporting on the contest is up to the contest organizers.

A second is that anything anyone wants to say should be accepted on the SSA website.

A third is that in the absence of repeated and offensive statements, people should be allowed to say what they want, provided that they label it clearly as their opinions.

There may be other options, as well.

I don't agree with Ken Sorenson that because able and dedicated volunteers have agreed to take on the difficult and burdensome task of managing a contest, they also have a right to immunity from criticism on the SSA website or the right to decide who may use the site to comment on their conduct of the contest. Responsible criticism makes a positive contribution to good decision-making. In fact, most of the safety talks at our contests are constructive criticism of pilot decision-making.

I also don't support the second option. The SSA website is not a public forum where there can be no restrictions on speech beyond the limits applicable to the government's power to limit speech in a public forum.

I favor the third option. In the absence of repeated, offensive (not merely critical) statements, people who want to take the time and trouble to write about our contests should be able to post their comments on the SSA website, provided they are labeled as personal opinion and not that of the contest organizers or the SSA. Determining whether a commentator has abused the right to access should be vested in the Contest Committee, or its chair or the Board, but not in the people who are the subject to the criticism. Measured by that standard, Frank's comments were fair criticism of the tasking at the Logan contest. The contest organizers should not have removed him from the website and the SSA Contest Committee and Board should not, as it did, try to distance itself from their ill-advised decision while allowing their action to stand.

The Contest Committee or the Board should address this issue and establish a policy for future contests.

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My comments and suggestions are intended to be helpful and to improve contest flying and contest administration. I hope they will be considered in that light.

Sincerely,

Michael L. Shakman