

Fuel Strategies

The best way to make that voice in your head sit down and shut up is to act on its advice; it's not the same as listening to an in-law or pesky brother...not when it saves your life. Some easy steps can help gag that voice for the duration.

For example, if you've ever experienced the nagging doubts about actual fuel supply once airborne, well, silencing that noise is easy. For many of us, doing a real-world, no-shortcuts, pre-flight fuel-quantity check begins by hanging out with the rampie, watching the motion lotion pour into the tank, looking down the filler neck—with a flashlight, if necessary—to confirm its level and sealing the caps yourself. Perform this little chore for every tank, every flight, and there should never be a doubt about fuel—at least, never one linked to the refueling process.



DOWNWIND IS YOUR FRIEND

At the first sign of a fuel supply question while en route, find the closest alternate in terms of flight time, not mileage. Turning tail and flying downwind may get you to a usable landing spot faster than slogging forward or sideways—even if the airport is physically farther away. Especially if bucking a stiff headwind, think about the *quickest* way to get to a fuel pump, not the closest.

STAY HIGH

Climbing uses fuel; descents are free. In any fuel-doubtful situation, there's seldom a better alternative than cruise altitude for making the most of the situation.

First, gravity alone will assure your descent when the time comes. Second, at altitude you can reduce power and lean until the fuel system squeaks...increasing your time to dry tanks by a significant margin. Third, staying high and making good true airspeed is seldom a bad thing when looking for an alternate. High altitude and best groundspeed is the ideal.



BACK TRACKING

So, even after conservative planning, you've concluded the planned destination is unreachable. Instead, the first available airport should be the automatic choice, providing the runway is long enough. This can apply even if your only choice is a closed airport and you can't refuel until the next day. (A night sleeping in an airplane cabin beats a dead-stick landing in the dark.)

If the closest airport is back the way you came, perform a quick calculation on the winds; again, as noted earlier, it may be smarter to go to the next-closest field when a turn to a closer airport puts you into headwinds that will increase your time aloft.

NOTHING BEATS THE CLOSEST

Never, ever, overfly a suitable airport when you have questions about your fuel supply. Never, ever skip one thinking you'll make the next.

We've heard many rationalizations: We know people at the next one; it gets me closest to home; they've got a mechanic there; even, "Fuel is cheaper at the next one." Maybe, but it's not cheaper than an off-field landing.

Meanwhile, remember why you're in this situation: you're not sure about your fuel and the goal, always, is to get on the ground, safe and sound, at a selected landing site and under power.

