Making The PTS More "Practical"

As the FAA and industry consider further changes to the practical test and the PTS, incorporating the following would help ensure students receive adequate scenario-based training and know how to apply it in the real world:

• Integrate risk management and other SRM tasks in the areas of operation, tasks, and objectives throughout the PTS. For example, as an examiner, I would want to see an applicant prepare a risk analysis for a proposed flight that contains real-world risks rather than for the actual weather and other conditions on the day of the practical test, which is likely going to be sunny, clear and calm, or as close to those conditions as the applicant can schedule.

• To complement the above, the FAA needs to revise examiner standardization and flight instructor refresher training to ensure instructors can teach these new skills to their students and examiners can assess their understanding and performance properly.

• Splitting the practical test into three parts rather than the current ground and flight portions also should be considered. For example, the ground (oral) portion might remain similar to what exists today, with a renewed emphasis on risk management. The flight portion would be reduced by eliminating the artificial "cross-country" segment. The applicant would still have to demonstrate basic map reading, pilotage and radio navigation and communication skills on the way to and from the practice area, but the main purpose of the flight portion should be to test the applicant's basic aircraft handling and maneuvering skill.

• A new third phase of the test would test the applicant's planning, risk management and SRM skills in the context of a challenging cross-country scenario—or a more local scenario for sport and recreational pilot applicants—conducted and graded in either a flight training device, an advanced aviation training device, a personal computer advanced training device or, conceivably, in a to-be-developed online scenario. This portion could be accomplished before the actual practical test and be administered by an FAA-approved testing provider.

I acknowledge such changes should be preceded by research supporting their adoption and development activity to demonstrate that this testing concept would work. I believe it would, and it would also provide a far more realistic assessment of an applicant's ability to manage risks that he/she is likely to face in the real world than the current artificial environment of a "cross country" practical test element in the airplane. It would also provide more consistent assessment of these skills than the current system, which continues to show the flaws inherent with having more than 1800 examiners applying varying criteria, despite ongoing FAA standardization efforts.