

Checklist

Easter Eggs

It's amazing to discover – again – just how much information is available to us these days through the marvel of the World Wide Web. Before we started working on this issue of *FAA Safety Briefing*, I thought I had a fairly good sense of the major weather products that a prudent pilot should pick up, and then pick through, in preparation for a flight. And maybe most of us *do* have a reasonable understanding of the more obvious ones, such as ADDS, AFSS, and DUAT/DUATS.

But then a colleague clued me in to a little gem of a weather product, one tucked away behind a sidebar menu on the National Weather Service (NWS) Aviation Weather page. Though not deliberately hidden, like the playful “Easter egg” mini-apps that software engineers sometimes embed to amuse those clever enough to find them, the discovery of this particular treasure was every bit as delightful. And the site's appearance made me think of real Easter eggs: as you see from the screen shot, the map's cheery color scheme is reminiscent of a freshly-filled basket of Easter eggs.

Aviation Forecast Discussion

So what's in the basket? The official name for this cool little tool is the TAF Forecast Discussion. Here's a step-by-step guide to getting there.

First, go to the NWS Aviation Weather Center's home page (<http://www.aviationweather.gov/>). On the left side is a Java-type menu with several items and sub-items. The last item under the “Forecasts” menu is labeled “TAF/FA.” When you mouse over “TAF/FA,” a previously hidden pop-up menu appears. Hop down to the last item, “TAF Forecast Discussion” and, voilà! The multi-hued meteorological map magically appears, with an invitation to click on the map in order to see the forecast discussion.

Clicking on any given colored part of the map produces a short, mostly plain text description of the expected weather conditions within its boundaries. Here's the official product description, taken straight



from the “FYI” section of the Aviation Forecast Discussion page:

*Aviation Forecast Discussions are taken from the **AVIATION** section of local National Weather Service forecast office Area Forecast Discussions. This section provides the local office forecaster's thoughts, reasoning, and uncertainty factors considered for aviation weather, ceiling, and visibility information contained in the TAFs.*

From my perspective, the key to the utility of this tool lies in the second sentence: It **provides the local office forecaster's thoughts, reasons, and uncertainty factors considered** in the process of developing the material in the official forecast.

Many of those who remember the days of visiting an on-airport Flight Service Station cherished being able to get the real scoop, one flavored by the staff's encyclopedic knowledge of local weather idiosyncrasies. Though it doesn't make up for the lack of face-to-face contact, the Aviation Weather Discussion tool does provide a bit more flavor and context to season your understanding of the standard terminal area forecast (TAF) and area forecast (FA).

Try it out, and tell us what you think. And by all means, please be sure to share the news of any other “Easter eggs” you find hidden in cyberspace. We're all ears.

Susan Parson is a Special Assistant in the FAA's Flight Standards Service and editor of FAA Safety Briefing. She is an active general aviation pilot and flight instructor.