

SID/STAR phraseology issues

Background:

In November 2007, ICAO issued an amendment to PANS-ATM Document 4444 that included new procedures and phraseologies for SID/STAR. The amendment called for Level restrictions issued by ATC in air-ground communications to be repeated in conjunction with subsequent level clearances in order to remain in effect (Para 11.4.2.6.2.5). However, when aircraft are operating on a published SID or STAR procedure and are cleared to a higher/lower level, the aircraft shall follow the published vertical profile of the procedure unless such restrictions are explicitly cancelled by ATC (Para 6.3.2.4 (SID); 6.5.2.4 (STAR)).

It became apparent that the implementation and application of this amendment was at best inconsistent. Some States completely adopted it, some partially adopted it, and others did not adopt it at all.

The Problem

The inconsistency of implementation and application of the amendment led to interpretations of the phraseology, which in turn led to assumptions being made by the pilot and/or air traffic controller

e.g. **“Climb to level 160”** could mean do not comply with the level restrictions in one geographic area or comply with level restrictions if in another.

This would mean the potential for air traffic controllers to face a loss of separation or for a pilot to face a level bust or worse - this is clearly unacceptable.

The Solution

In October 2009, the IFALPA Air Traffic Services (ATS) Committee and the IFATCA Technical Operations Committee (TOC) held a joint meeting in Las Vegas. During the meeting the situation was fully discussed and acceptable phraseology was agreed upon.

Where level restrictions apply, the phraseology would be:

“Climb via/Descend via”

Where the level restrictions do not apply, the phraseology would be:

“Open Climb/Open Descend”

Details of the subsequent problems and proposed solutions were outlined in 12SAB014, issued 18 October 2011. At the beginning of 2012 there were numerous meetings facilitated by the ICAO Air Navigation Commission which resulted in proposed amendment of the PANS-ATM. The proposed amendment included two paragraphs whereby the air traffic controllers would explicitly state whether or not the level restrictions on the SID or STAR were to be followed and also included phraseology. The States and Industry comments were reviewed and there were some concerns with the phraseology suggested. The ICAO Air Navigation Commission was unable to come to a consensus over the proposed amendment despite industry arguments to move forward. The issue has now been referred to a new group of experts to be formed in the near future.

This means that after 5 years of deliberations, the confusion concerning SID/STAR level clearances continues. The pilot community is bitterly disappointed that the ICAO process has been unable to resolve this potentially dangerous situation.

IFALPA Recommendation

When navigating on a published procedure (SID/STAR/CDO/CCO) crews are urged to request clarification from ATC when there is any doubt whatsoever as to whether or not published level restrictions should be followed.

Some controllers may express frustration with the queries but it is vital to make certain that you have the proper altitude clearance and vertical profile expectations.