



Photo courtesy of Whanganui Airport

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WHAT THE HECK IS UNICOM?



If you're a pilot who's never been to Ardmore, you've probably never come across UNICOM. Now that Whanganui Airport has also established the service, it's probably time to explain what it is, what it isn't, and how to use it.

A UNICOM (universal communications) service is provided at uncontrolled aerodromes that have become busy enough to warrant additional oversight of airfield activity by a dedicated operator.

It is *not*, however, an air traffic service.

The UNICOM operator can pass on to pilots the weather conditions the operator observes at the aerodrome. They can also, when requested by a pilot, relay information about the general location of other aircraft.

They can give information on the runway currently in use but not designate the runway to be used.

With an air traffic service, responsibility for traffic management transfers from the pilot to ATS and the pilot must comply. But with UNICOM, the operator transmits useful information but the pilot still makes the decision about what to do. »

// MORE INFORMATION

For more information on what a UNICOM service provides and does not provide, read Advisory Circular AC139-12 *Aerodromes – Certification, Operation and Use – UNICOM and AWIB Services* at aviation.govt.nz > [advisory circulars](#).



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» Why Whanganui?

When Whanganui Airport's safety officer Hayden MacPhee was a B-cat with the local aero club 20 years ago, there were fewer than 10,000 movements a year at the airfield.

Just before COVID-19 hit last year, there were about 83,000, mainly due to the establishment there of the commercial pilot academy.

Hayden says that because of the location of Whanganui, the airfield also receives a high number of itinerant pilots.

"They follow the coast as they transit through. Or they drop in to refuel because we're quite central.

"But if they haven't done proper preflight planning, they can be a real risk to safety.

"We've had them transit through the circuit on their way to somewhere else. We've had a spate of pilots trying to conduct a non-standard joining procedure. Some of them are completely unprepared for all the training traffic.

"Apart from the sheer number of flights the academy does, if someone tries something a bit left-field as they join, it can confuse the student pilots and contributes even more to a potential breakdown in safety."

Another factor is the number and wide range of airfield users – from ab initio training flights to agricultural operations, from air ambulance and passenger transport flights to extensive helicopter operations.

"The helicopter circuit is contra to the fixed-wing circuit so if fixed-wing aircraft end up descending on the wrong side of the traffic pattern, they'll be in conflict with the helicopter circuit," says Hayden.

"And helicopter pilots need to remember there are specific requirements applying to rotary operations in that, if they arrive from the south, they must conform to the established fixed-wing circuit pattern, and not just find a gap and squeeze in, usually directly to a fuel installation."

CAA aeronautical services officer (aerodromes) Nick Jackson says a UNICOM service exists to facilitate aviation at an uncontrolled aerodrome.

"By providing basic aerodrome information, it allows an airport operator to oversee activities at the aerodrome, making sure pilots are aware of hazards and promoting safety.

"Pilots still retain full responsibility for how they operate their aircraft. A UNICOM operator cannot provide an air traffic service.

"A UNICOM operator can, however, provide information, if a pilot asks for it, on the general location of any aircraft the UNICOM service operator knows about.

"They can give details of temporary or permanent navigation hazards associated with the aerodrome, normally published or notified by the aeronautical information service."

Nick says if a UNICOM operator becomes aware a collision is imminent, the operator should do all they can to inform the pilots, so the pilots can determine the best course of action.

"When the UNICOM operator exercises such duty of care, the aerodrome operator must track and investigate the occurrences, and report them to the CAA.

"They provide useful information when the continued suitability of UNICOM is reviewed or if the introduction of an air traffic service is warranted."

Hayden MacPhee says the operators at Whanganui are happy to help out pilots who haven't encountered a UNICOM service before.

"All they need to do is call the tower at Whanganui on (06) 349 3166 and say, 'Hey, I'm not familiar with this, can you help me?' On the VHF frequency the same applies: 'Whanganui UNICOM, Alpha Alpha Juliet, this is my first time using UNICOM'.

"But we really urge them to consult the AIP before they fly," says Hayden.

"If they're trying to do that only as they approach the airfield, they could get themselves and everyone else into real conflict." ➤