

23 China edges open its low-altitude airspace

Global Times | Chen Dujuan
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China will further relax its ban on low-altitude airspace for private use, China's top economic planning body announced Friday.

China would also boost the number of cities and facilities available for general aviation, said Huang Min, director-general of the Department of Basic Industries at the National Development and Reform Commission, at a press conference Friday, with the commission coordinating with government bureaus to achieve airspace reform.

One of the two categories of civil aviation, general aviation refers to all flights other than military and scheduled airline passenger and cargo flights. Most of the world's air traffic falls into this category.

Military control of airspace below 1,000 meters has for decades stifled the general aviation market of China, slowing down development of the civil industry, experts explained.

China had 286 airports and temporary landing strips available by 2011, far fewer than the 15,000 in the US, according to the Civil Aviation Administration of China.

"Led by market demand, technology and management have been developing in recent years to provide better access to low-altitude airspace," Zou Jianjun, director of the Institute of Air Transport Services, told the Global Times.

But airport, landing and traffic facilities and regulations need to be improved for general aviation, he suggested.

Starting January this year, six cities including Tangshan, Qingdao, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Kunming and Xi'an, as well as areas of northeastern, central and southern China have been experimenting with pilot schemes for the opening up of low-altitude airspace.

China aims at 19 percent annual growth in general aviation air traffic from 502,700 flying hours last year to 2 million by 2020, according to guidance for aviation sector development released by the State Council on July 12.

"The massive general aviation market in China will benefit aircraft manufacturers and companies along the industrial chain such as ground service providers and training," Zou said.

Specialist civil pilot training classes have also taken off in China: Civil Aviation Flight University of China, China's only full-time regular institution of higher education for civil pilots, began offering its first private helicopter license class at Xinjin Flight College in March, with 13 students graduating in July.

The 200,000 yuan, 50-hour class is popular, Liao Lunjin, a researcher and engineer at the college, told the Global Times, already attracting a fresh intake of 20 students that includes rich helicopter owners and people wanting to work as commercial pilots.

His college had six helicopters now, Liao said, and would rent five more for the first half of 2013 to meet rapidly growing demand.

The top priority in opening up low-altitude airspace to private aircraft was to "ensure its safety," said Huang of the commission.

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