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NO DUMB QUESTIONS: UPDATING CHARTS

Q. How often does the NOAA update sectional charts by satellite? I've noticed that where I fly there is a new reservoir that doesn't appear on the new sectional or VFR terminal chart for the area.

Don G., Alameda, California

A. Actually, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) doesn't use satellites to update its charts at all, but that doesn't mean that every chart isn't carefully examined and updated regularly. Sectional and terminal area charts for the United States are updated every year. Occasionally, a major project, such as the building of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, can interfere with NOAA's ability to update a chart on the normal schedule. When that happens, the update schedule for the affected chart and bordering charts may be altered to conform to the schedule for the project. The other exceptions to the one-year update cycle are a few charts for the wilds of Alaska, which are updated every two years. Every chart includes information on how often it is updated and when the next update will take place.

NOAA has four primary ways of getting information to update the terrain features on its charts. Most information about the need for changes to charts comes from pilots, from the United States Geological Survey (USGS), from local government officials, or from teams of NOAA pilots who travel around the nation flying over virtually every inch of country on every chart.

Information from pilots is the first and best source, according to staff cartographer Christo Cambetes. Pilots who notice something new or different in their area are asked to pass that information on to NOAA's chart makers. For instance, to report a new reservoir, you could call 800/626-3677 or send an e-mail (aerochart@noaa.com). If you call you will reach a voice mail system that will ask you to give your name and phone number, to identify the chart that you are calling about, and to explain the discrepancy in the chart. That information is then given to the cartographer who handles that sectional chart. He or she will call you back within 24 hours to get more information from you or to let you know that NOAA is already aware of the change.

The second source of information is the USGS, which surveys the United States on an ongoing basis. The USGS produces surface maps called quadrangles which are two-feet by three-feet in size at a scale of 1:24,000. But, to give you an idea of how big a terrain feature needs to be to make it onto a sectional chart, when that two-foot by three-foot USGS quadrangle is shrunk to sectional chart scale, it is about the size of a postage stamp.

The third potential source of charting information is local government officials. When a city or county is planning a project such as erecting a tower, building a new sports stadium, or creating a reservoir, officials may contact NOAA to share information about the project and its location.

The fourth main source of information for sectional charts is NOAA's Flight Edit Team. This is a group of pilots and photographers who fly around the country checking every sectional chart. Individual teams typically consist of a pilot and co-pilot and may also include a photographer. The teams fly from one end of a sectional to the other, covering the whole chart. They look for changes such as new landmarks or the demolition of old landmarks. The area represented by every chart in the United States is overflowed by a Flight Edit Team once every three years on average.

There are a number of reasons that the new reservoir in your area might not appear on the latest sectional chart. One possibility is that the reservoir is too small to be clearly visible once it has been shrunk to chart scale. It's also possible that NOAA cartographers have the information about the new reservoir but received it too late to make the cutoff date for changes to the latest chart. It's also possible that no one has told NOAA chart makers about the new reservoir yet. Cambetes urges pilots who notice a discrepancy in a chart to call and not to assume that someone else has informed NOAA of the change. If you want to be sure that NOAA gets the information, try calling or sending an e-mail. For more information about NOAA aeronautical charts call 800/638-8972 or visit the Web site (<http://acc.nos.noaa>).



Elizabeth A Tennyson

Senior Director of Communications

AOPA Senior Director of Communications Elizabeth Tennyson is an instrument-rated private pilot who first joined AOPA in 1998.