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Are you Ready for a Ramp Check?

It's a beautiful Sunday, so you arrive at the airport to preflight before flying to your favorite \$500 hamburger spot. Just before you pull the plane out of the hangar, a serious looking guy walks up to you and says: "Good morning. Where are you headed today?" Even if you say: "Ah, well, nowhere", you are still getting an old-fashioned FAA Ramp Check.

What is a Ramp Check?

As part of its ongoing compliance efforts, the FAA has a program called Ramp Inspections, commonly known as Ramp Checks. Common Reasons for a Ramp Inspection. Ramp inspections may result when the inspector:

- 1) Observes an unsafe operation in the traffic pattern or in the ramp.
- 2) Receives notification from air traffic control (ATC) of an unsafe operation.
- 3) Observes obvious discrepancies that may affect the airworthiness of the aircraft.
- 4) Conducts routine surveillance activities.¹

What are your Rights?

Sorry, but you don't have the right to refuse. This is not a criminal case, but an administrative investigation designed to promote air safety. Remember, your pilot certificate is a privilege and not a right. The FAA can (and will) use your silence to investigate further. Most ramp checks are fairly quick and simple, so it's best to simply cooperate and send the inspector on his or her merry way.

What Can the FAA Inspect?

The inspector can ask you for the following aircraft documents:

- The Airworthiness Certificate.
- The aircraft Registration.
- The POH.
- The weight and balance information
- Aeronautical charts (if needed for navigation, they must be current).

Additionally, the inspector can ask for the following pilot documents:

- Pilot Certificate.
- Medical Certificate (or BasicMed Cert).
- Logbook
- Photo ID

Looking at the above, you may be asking: “*Do I need to carry my logbook?*” “*What about my weight and balance?*” The answer to both is no², so simply say “*They are at home*”, and agree to produce them later. Please, never carry these items on you.

What Can the FAA NOT Inspect?

A Ramp Check is not a “blank check”. The inspector may not:

- Board your aircraft.
- Delay your departure unreasonably.
- Demand that you answer questions.
- Ground you or your aircraft.

Should I cooperate?

Unless you are dealing with a very rare absolute thug, yes you should cooperate. Remain calm and cool; it’s probably a random check. The inspector is obligated to show proper identification, and are supposed to volunteer it. If they don’t, ask for it.

Even if they inspector accuses you of wrongdoing, smile and remain helpful. Under the FAA’s 2015 revised compliance philosophy³, few minor FAR violations are being prosecuted. Becoming hostile to the inspector will simply make matters worse. Of course, all of the above presumes the only person you are dealing with is an FAA inspector. If law enforcement is part of the inspection, and if they start making strange accusations, you may need immediately contact an attorney to assert your rights to remain silent and avoid being subject to unreasonable search and seizure.

In sum, ramp checks are usually quick and painless. What makes them painful are when pilots have improper or outdated documents, so always ask yourself: “*What would the FAA think?*”

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¹ Flight Standards Information Management System, Volume 6, Chapter 1, Section 4.

² Except student pilots

³ <https://www.faa.gov/about/initiatives/cp/>