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Feasibility Study
Airborne LIDAR for Clear Air Turbulence Detection

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FOREWORD

This feasibility study was prepared by Special Committee 230 (SC-230) and approved by the RTCA Program Management Committee (PMC) on June 11, 2020.

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- developing consensus on the application of pertinent technology to fulfill user and provider requirements, including development of minimum operational performance standards for electronic systems and equipment that support aviation; and

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RTCA Special Committee 230 was tasked with assessing and documenting the maturity and the feasibility of using an airborne Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) system for detection of clear air turbulence (CAT).

This feasibility study document details the context of the study and a description of the intended function (situational display of regions ahead of the aircraft that present potential hazards to the aircraft due to clear air turbulence). Its goals are:

- To determine realistic goals for an airborne LIDAR system when used for clear air turbulence detection.
- To determine aircraft manufacturer needs for an airborne LIDAR clear air detection function.
- To determine the feasibility that LIDAR systems can meet aircraft manufacturer needs.

Aircraft manufacturers have expressed the following operational goals for a LIDAR-based CAT detection function:

- A minimum detection range of 12 NM, in order to provide at least 90 seconds to secure the majority of passengers and crew.
- An angular display extent of +/- 25 degrees from the aircraft's longitudinal axis or track.
- Consistency with WXR-based ATA or Turbulence functions for:
    - Display thresholds
    - Precision/refresh rates
    - Must and must-not detection requirements

CAT Detection

SNR analysis was performed on two types of LIDAR systems, with the following results:

- Coherent LIDAR: Existing coherent LIDAR systems are not able to meet the OEM's requirements for long range CAT detection at high altitude (around 32,000 ft), although it may be possible to meet these requirements at lower altitudes. Although many experimental demonstrations of CAT detection have been shown in the past, further research is needed in the area of LIDAR transmitters if coherent LIDAR systems are to be used for airborne CAT detection.
- Direct Detection LIDAR: Direct detection LIDAR systems with state-of-the-art laser power, telescope sizes, and detection equipment may be able to detect moderate to severe clear air turbulence for all altitudes up to 39,000 ft. Numerical simulations suggest that the direct detection LIDAR can meet OEM requirements. Further research and flight tests are needed to substantiate the simulations.

Gust Load Alleviation

Using the same SNR analysis, LIDAR manufacturers concluded that it may be feasible to meet OEM requirements for gust load alleviation. Analysis indicates that when enough aerosols are present in the atmosphere, coherent LIDAR systems with lower output power have comparable performance to much higher-powered direct detection LIDAR systems. However, areas that are low in aerosol content will be challenging for coherent LIDAR systems.

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GUIDELINES

This document uses a structure similar to a Minimal Operational Performance Standard (MOPS). It will assess and document the maturity and the feasibility of using airborne LIDAR for clear air turbulence (CAT) detection. The content has not been written as requirements (no “shall” statements). It considers existing functions and their criticality.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT 1

1.1 Background 1
1.2 Impacts of Turbulence on Aviation 2
1.2.1 Safety Impacts 2
1.2.2 Economic Impacts 4
1.3 CAT Pilot Reports 5
1.4 CAT Projects and Flight Test Campaigns 5
1.4.1 The First Airborne LIDAR for Clear Air Turbulence Detection 5
1.4.2 Projects & Campaigns in The United States 6
1.4.3 Projects & Campaigns in Europe 7
1.4.4 Projects & Campaigns in Japan 7
1.5 LIDAR Technology for CAT Detection 8
1.5.1 Wind Sensing Coherent Doppler LIDAR 8
1.5.2 Wind sensing direct-detection Doppler LIDAR 9
1.5.3 Air Density Fluctuation Sensing Direct-Detection LIDAR 10

2. REFERENCES & DEFINITIONS 13

2.1 References 13
2.2 Acronyms, Initialisms, and Definitions 19

3. DEFINITION OF INTENDED FUNCTION 23

3.1 Functional Hazard Analysis (FHA) recommendations 23

4. OPERATIONAL AND PERFORMANCE GOALS 25

4.1 Operational Needs 25
4.1.1 Conceptual Operational Goals 25
4.1.2 Altitude, Temperature, and Flight Phase 25
4.1.3 Geographic Localization 25
4.1.4 Range 25
4.1.5 Non-interference 26
4.1.6 Definition of Thresholds for CAT 26
4.1.7 Nuisance/Missed Annunciation Rate 26
4.1.8 CAT Detection Envelope 26
4.1.9 Retrofit 26
4.2 Other LIDAR applications 27
4.2.1 Gust Load alleviation 27
4.2.2 Wake Turbulence 27
4.2.3 Particle (Volcanic Ash) Detection 27
4.2.4 Weather Hazard / Windshear Detection 27
4.2.5 Air Data 28
4.2.6 Meteorological Observations 28

5. LIDAR COMPLIANCE WITH OPERATIONAL AND PERFORMANCE GOALS 30

5.1 Past Accomplishments 30
5.1.1 Wind Sensing Coherent Doppler LIDAR for CAT detection 30
5.1.2 Wind Sensing Direct-Detection Doppler LIDAR 41
5.1.3 Air Density fluctuation sensing Direct-Detection LIDAR 42
5.1.4 Summary of Past Accomplishments 44
5.2 Preliminary Simulation Study on Coherent and Direct-Detection LIDAR to Meet the Aircraft OEM's Needs for High-Altitude Application 46
5.2.1 Atmospheric Parameters 46
5.2.2 Parameter Study on Coherent LIDAR 47
5.2.3 Direct-Detection LIDAR for CAT Detection Sensitivity 55
5.2.4 Gust Load Alleviation with Direct-Detection Doppler Wind LIDAR 65
5.2.5 Discussion on Direct Detection LIDAR 70
5.3 Compliance Matrix 74

6. VALIDATION AND VERIFICATION STRATEGY 77

6.1 Validation 77
6.2 Verification 77

7. DISPLAY SYMBOLOGY CONCEPTS 79

7.1 Current Standards for Display of Meteorological Information 79
7.2 Display Constraints 79
7.2.1 Color Availability 79
7.2.2 Display Protocols 80
7.2.3 Existing WXR Display Symbology 80
7.3 Other Constraints 85
7.4 CAT Display Symbology Recommendations 86
7.4.1 Concepts Considered 86
7.4.2 CAT Display Symbology Layering 87
7.5 Recommended Display Symbology 87
7.6 Human Factors Perspective 88

8. WAY FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS 89

8.1 Conclusions 89
8.1.1 CAT Detection 89
8.1.2 Gust Load Alleviation 89
8.2 Recommendations 89
8.2.1 CAT Detection 89
8.2.2 Gust Load Alleviation 90

APPENDIX A: VOICES FROM JAPANESE AIRLINES A-1

TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1-1: Flight Operations for Each Type of Atmospheric Hazard (1987-2011) [8] 3
Table 4-1: Relation Between the Aircraft Class, Wing Loading, and Minimum Performance Level 26
Table 5-1: Representative Atmospheric Parameters Used in the LIDAR Feasibility Study [2] 47
Table 5-2: Example of LIDAR Parameters 50
Table 5-3: Required Pulse energy for the Laser Transmitter for Various Altitudes and Detection Probabilities 51
Table 5-4: Example of LIDAR Parameters 53
Table 5-5: Parameters Used for the Derivation of Direct-Detection SNR 64
Table 5-6: Settings for the Calculation of DWL *P.A.P* 69
Table 5-7: Lidar Compliance with Operational and Performance Goals 74
Table 7-1: Existing Display Symbology – Company One Weather Radar 80
Table 7-2: Existing Display Symbology on Company Two Radar 82
Table 7-3: Display Symbology Considered 86

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1: Illustration of Polar and Subtropical Jet Streams and Their Relative Location Around the Globe [5] 1
Figure 1-2: Kelvin-Helmholtz Instability 2
Figure 1-3: Turbulence Types in Part 121 Accidents: 2008-2016 3
Figure 1-4: Phase of Flight for Part 121 Turbulence Accidents: 2008-2016 [14] 3
Figure 1-5: Injuries Due to Turbulence [19] 5
Figure 1-6: Example of System Configuration of Wind Sensing Coherent Doppler LIDAR [37] 9
Figure 1-7: Optical Spectrum of Mie and Rayleigh Scattering Regions [43] 10
Figure 1-8: Example of System Configuration of Wind Sensing Direct Detection Doppler LIDAR [43] 10
Figure 1-9: Turbulence Indication Within Received Signal [45] 11
Figure 5-1: National Integrated Windshear Program: NASA Research Aircraft and LIDAR Sensor Head [1] 30
Figure 5-2: National Integrated Windshear Program: Example of Wind Sensing Results (altitude: 500 m) [25] 31
Figure 5-3: Overview of ACLAIM LIDAR and its Installation [29] 31
Figure 5-4: Time Chart of Measurable Distance in ACLAIM Project (altitude: 13500 ft) [29] 32
Figure 5-5: Demonstration of Moderate CAT detection [29] 32
Figure 5-6: Example of Wake Vortex Detection in DLR's Project (altitude: unknown) [40] 33
Figure 5-7: ONERA:LIDAR-based Detection [41] 33
Figure 5-8: ONERA: Example of Wake Vortex Sensing [41] 34
Figure 5-9: JAXA's Flight Test Campaign with Compact LIDAR [47] 34
Figure 5-10: JAXA: Example of Wind Shear Detection (altitude: 600 m) [47] 35
Figure 5-11: JAXA: Example of Turbulence Detection Using Fh-factor (altitude: 1200 m) [47] 35
Figure 5-12: JAXA: Overview of Flight Test Campaign Using Improved LIDAR [49] 36
Figure 5-13: JAXA: Turbulence Detection at a Long Distance (altitude: 2,000 ft) [49] 36
Figure 5-14: JAXA: Long Range Wind Sensing (altitude: 5,000 ft) [49] 36
Figure 5-15: JAXA: Wind Sensing at High Altitude (altitude: 28,700 ft) [49] 36
Figure 5-16: JAXA: Turbulence Detection at Middle Altitude (altitude: 10,500 ft) [50] 37
Figure 5-17: JAXA: Weak Turbulence Detection at High Altitude (altitude: 40,000 ft) [50] 37
Figure 5-18: JAXA: LIDAR Developed by SA Project (weight: 83.7 kg) [51] 38
Figure 5-19: JAXA: Detection Distance in the SA Project Flight Test Campaign [51] 38
Figure 5-20: JAXA: Example of Wind Shear Detection in SA Project (altitude: below 3,000 ft) [52] 38
Figure 5-21: JAXA: Example of Turbulence Detection in SA Project (altitude: below 3,000 ft) [52] 39
Figure 5-22: JAXA SA Project Display Concepts [52] 39
Figure 5-23: JAXA SA Project Display System Installation [52] 40
Figure 5-24: JAXA's Full Flight Simulator [52] 40
Figure 5-25: JAXA SA Project: Verified Usefulness of the Developed Display [52] 40
Figure 5-26: AWIATOR LIDAR Installation in the Aircraft [42] 41
Figure 5-27: Airbus A340 Aircraft with AWIATOR LIDAR [43] 41
Figure 5-28: AWIATOR: Wind Sensing Demonstration at High Altitude [43] 42
Figure 5-29: Photo of the First Airborne CAT Sensing LIDAR [22] 42
Figure 5-30: First Evidence of the CAT (aircraft wake) Detection Using Airborne LIDAR (altitude: below 10,000 ft) [22] 43
Figure 5-31: DELICAT LIDAR [44] 43
Figure 5-32: Map Showing Flights Made During DELICAT Flight Test Campaign [45] 44
Figure 5-33: DELICAT LIDAR: Distance Dependence of Signal to Noise Ratio [44] 44
Figure 5-34: Schematic of Steps for the Feasibility Study 46
Figure 5-35: Schematic of Detectability 49

Figure 5-36: Example of Distance Dependence of Detectability 50
Figure 5-37: Predicted Performance of JAXA SafeAvio LIDAR 51
Figure 5-38: Example of Distance Dependence of Detectability 52
Figure 5-39: Radar-Measured and LIDAR-Measured Spectrum 54
Figure 5-40: Calculation Process for CAT Detection Probability 55
Figure 5-41: Procedure for Direct-Detection LIDAR Analysis 55
Figure 5-42: ICAO Turbulence Levels and Resulting Air Density Fluctuations by Equations (8) and (10) 57
Figure 5-43: Backscatter Ratio for 355 nm LIDAR for Relevant Altitudes 58
Figure 5-44: Setup for Density-Technique Turbulence LIDAR 58
Figure 5-45: Fabry-Perot and Michelson Response Functions [75]. 59
Figure 5-46: Calculated Power-Aperture-Product for Given Requirements 61
Figure 5-47: Trading Laser Power Against Receiver Telescope Diameter 63
Figure 5-48: Scanning Geometry Parameters Comparison 65
Figure 5-49: Scanning Geometry Parameters 66
Figure 5-50: P.A.P. Required for Single-vector Direct-Detection DWL for Gust Load Alleviation 67
Figure 5-51: Range Dependency of the Determined P.A.P. for Two Values of CAT Severity (EDR) 71
Figure 5-52: Scanning Geometry Derived from Radar Setups 72
Figure 5-53: Altitude-Dependent “Atmospheric Gain Factor” in Eq. (19) and (20) 73
Figure 7-1: Display Example from Company One WXR (MultiScan V2) 82
Figure 7-2: Display Example from Company Two WXR 85
Figure 7-3: Display Example from Company Two Navigation Display on Synthetic MAP 86
Figure 7-4: Examples of WXR Based Turbulence Symbology 88

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1. INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT

1.1 Background

One of the most significant forms of threat to an aircraft comes in the form of turbulence. Clear air turbulence (CAT), which is usually encountered in cloud-free regions at high-altitudes (~20,000 ft – 50,000 ft) outside of convective regions, can be sudden and severe. CAT is a recognized problem which impacts all aircraft operations. This phenomenon is especially troublesome because it is often encountered unexpectedly, and frequently does not provide visual clues to warn the pilots of the hazard.

Per the FAA Advisory Circular on Clear Air Turbulence Avoidance, AC 00-30C [5]:

> CAT is defined as "sudden severe turbulence occurring in cloudless regions that causes violent buffeting of aircraft." This term is commonly applied to higher altitude turbulence associated with wind shear. The most comprehensive definition is high-altitude turbulence encountered outside of convective clouds. This includes turbulence in cirrus clouds, within and in the vicinity of standing lenticular clouds and, in some cases, in clear air in the vicinity of thunderstorms. Generally, though, CAT definitions exclude turbulence caused by thunderstorms, low-altitude temperature inversions, thermals, strong surface winds, or local terrain features.

Historically, Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) sensors have been shown to detect various atmospheric phenomenon including but not limited to: mountain wave induced turbulence, low altitude rotors, volcanic ash, high altitude ice crystals, low level Windshear, etc.

The scope of this report includes the detection of moderate or greater turbulence. It also addresses detection of turbulence due to terrain features such as mountain waves, low altitude rotors, and convectively induced turbulence in cloud-free regions.

One of the principal areas where CAT is found is in the vicinity of jet streams. Jet streams are relatively narrow bands of strong wind in the upper levels of the atmosphere. In jet streams, winds blow from west to east, but the flow meanders southward and northward in waves. Jet streams follow the boundaries between hot and cold air. Because these hot and cold air boundaries are most pronounced in winter, jet streams are strongest in winter in both the northern and southern hemispheres. One noteworthy generator of CAT is the confluence of two jet streams. The wind shear effect between two jet streams in the region of confluence and immediately downstream is often highly turbulent.

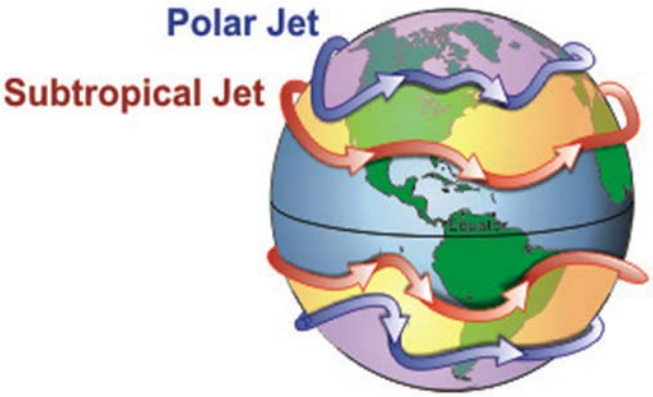


Figure 1-1: Illustration of Polar and Subtropical Jet Streams and Their Relative Location Around the Globe [5]

Another phenomenon that can cause CAT is Kelvin-Helmholtz instability. This instability can occur when there is a velocity shear in a single contiguous fluid, or when there is a vertical velocity difference across

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the interface of two fluids. For example, this instability can occur if high altitude air is moving at a different speed or in a different direction than the lower altitude air. The interface between the two layers forms waves in the air, which can become turbulent. With enough humidity, these waves can become visible. Figure 1-2 shows an example of naturally occurring turbulence. Additional examples of turbulence are depicted in figure 1-16 in [87].



Figure 1-2: Kelvin-Helmholtz Instability

1.2 Impacts of Turbulence on Aviation

1.2.1 Safety Impacts

- In the United States, from the period 1987-2011, CAT affected 75% of 14 CFR Part 121operators [8]
- From 1980-2008, flight attendants received 184 of 298 serious injuries [9]
- From 1980-2003 only 4 people who were seated with seatbelts fastened [9] received serious injuries during turbulence.

Table 1-1 below summarizes the distribution of several categories of hazardous weather, including turbulence, across the categories of flight operations. Notable information from this summary is that CAT primarily affects Part 121 operations (75%), while both cloud and convective turbulence are split more evenly between 14 CFR Part 121 [13] and 14 CFR Part 91 [12]. Note that other types of turbulence, such as wind shear, deformation, tropopause folds, etc. may also contribute to CAT.

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