ALERT BULLETIN

AB 2023:23/9-3
11/22/2023
2026648

TO: FAA (AJV-14, ATM A11 TRACON)

INFO: FAA (AVP-1, AVP-200, AAS-1, ATM ANC Tower, AAL-600, AFS-260, AFS-200, Director of Air Traffic Operations WSA), A4A, ALPA, AOPA, APA, ASAP, CAPA, ATSAP, ATSG, ICAO, ICASS, IFALPA, IPA, NAFI, NATCA, NBAA, NTSB, RAA

FROM: Becky L. Hooey, Director
NASA Aviation Safety Reporting System

SUBJ: ANC/A11 VFR/IFR Traffic Conflict Concerns

We recently received ASRS reports describing a safety concern that may involve your area of operational responsibility. We do not have sufficient details to assess either the factual accuracy or possible gravity of the report. It is our policy to relay the reported information to the appropriate authority for evaluation and any necessary follow-up. We feel you should be aware of the following:

ASRS received a report from an A11 TRACON Controller expressing concern regarding multiple IFR to VFR airborne conflicts in their area. Reporter stated they believe the conflicts are related to the multiple facilities and complex procedures in that region. Reporter recommended alterations to the airspace be implemented to enhance safety.

To properly assess the usefulness of our alert message service, we would appreciate it if you would take the time to give us your feedback on the value of the information that we have provided. Please contact Dr. Becky Hooey at (408) 541-2854 or email at becky.l.hooey@nasa.gov.

Aviation Safety Reporting System
P.O. Box 189 | Moffett Field, CA | 94035-0189

ACN 2026648	
DATE / TIME	
Date of Occurrence	202308
Local Time Of Day	1801 to 2400
PLACE	
Locale	ANC.Airport
State	AK
AIRCRAFT / EQUIPMENT X	
ATC / Advisory - TRACON	A11
Make Model Name	Commercial Fixed Wing
Operating Under FAR Part	121
AIRCRAFT / EQUIPMENT Y	
ATC / Advisory - TRACON	A11
Make Model Name	Small Aircraft, High Wing, 1 Eng, Fixed Gear
Operating Under FAR Part	91
PERSON 1	
Function - Air Traffic Control	Approach
ASRS Report Number	2026648
EVENTS	
Anomaly	ATC Issue - All Types
Anomaly	Conflict - Airborne Conflict
Anomaly	Deviation / Discrepancy - Procedural - Published Material / Policy
Detector - Automation	Air Traffic Control
Detector - Person	Air Traffic Control
Result - Flight Crew	FLC Complied w / Automation / Advisory
Result - Flight Crew	Requested ATC Assistance / Clarification
Result - Air Traffic Control	Issued New Clearance

NARRATIVE 1

Aircraft X departed ANC on the NOEND4 Departure. Aircraft Y was departing MRI on the Inlet Departure. Aircraft X was assigned to North Radar (NR) frequency as a departure. Aircraft Y was assigned to North Low (NL) frequency as a VFR transition. Aircraft X departed normally but was instructed to keep the initial 4000 ft. altitude restriction due to opposite direction traffic assigned 5000 ft. above. Ice was forecast for my area, and I was attempting to procure an icing report from an unrelated aircraft when Aircraft X departed. Aircraft Y was not pointed out to NR but had not yet entered my airspace so a point-out was not required. The NL Controller reports that their attention was about 20 miles to the north, where several aircraft needed safety alerts and were unresponsive – a common issue with aircraft in the practice area, I have been in the same situation hundreds of times before and can completely empathize. Before anyone could notice, Aircraft Y turned westbound in front of the departing Aircraft X. A heavy departure was requesting speed relief and was being accommodated as well as solicited for a report on the ice conditions forecast. Immediately afterward, Aircraft X called for the initial check-in, was identified, and advised of the unrelated traffic stopped above them.

The Aircraft Y data tag was not highlighted on my scope – not required but should be – and was still buried under two other VFR tags, preventing me from noticing their altitude conflict. The opposite direction Aircraft Z traffic at 5000 ft. was advised of merging targets. Around this time, the CA (Conflict Alert) activated and my automatic offsets had moved the data target, allowing me to finally read the altitude and discern the conflict. I

immediately issued the new traffic and simultaneously evaluated that the traffic was "way too high." I advised the pilot that a turn may be necessary as I was attempting to evaluate the rate of climb in the final seconds. Aircraft X reported the traffic in sight. As I was beginning to issue visual separation, the NL Controller behind me was also recognizing the conflict and shouting across the room that they were descending their aircraft out of the departure corridor and that Aircraft Y had Aircraft X in sight as well as an expedite descent assigned. I informed Aircraft X in the same breath that Aircraft Y was moving out of the way but also assigned visual separation at the same time. Aircraft X accepted visual separation with "wilco" and a call sign readback. Immediately after the readback, I realized that the actions were insufficient to maintain safety for both aircraft and issued a turn away from the traffic. With Aircraft X approaching and surrounded by several IFR aircraft, I decided to issue a practical course of action turning left heading 250 at the discretion of the pilot whom I felt had the best vantage for determining deconfliction with the rapidly closing target in sight.

Aircraft X reported clear of conflict and advised that they received an “RA.” I turned Aircraft X back toward their intended course and reiterated the original traffic above them to prevent a second proximity event. By this point, several aircraft had overshot their intended vector points and were being corrected back on course to clean up my airspace and prevent further error. I finished up coordination with the NL low sector behind me to finally get everyone on the same page and went back to Aircraft X to inquire as to the RA I had heard. The pilot of Aircraft X revealed that they had, indeed, taken my left turn and climbed above the Aircraft Y. I assured the pilot that the event was being logged on our end and that Aircraft X had not made any errors. Closest observed proximity was 0.54 NM and 700 ft. vertical with Aircraft X rapidly climbing above Aircraft Y but restricted beneath IFR traffic above at 5000 ft.

An IFR aircraft departing on a SID should not be put in a position to have to immediately turn to deconflict with traffic that are penetrating their departure corridor. The NL airspace is far too chaotic to allow VFR aircraft free reign to turn in front of departing traffic without permission. The VFR aircraft had no guidance after the Inlet Departure and went own navigation without advising anyone, which is completely allowed. The chaotic nature of the NL airspace simply does not accommodate the lead-in time necessary to catch and prevent such proximity events in a sufficient time to maintain safety. VFR aircraft departing the smaller airports need to have guidance or procedures that safely guide them around the departure corridors, which they might not be aware of, by default with the assumption that the NL Controller is not able to reach or notice them in time.

It is not uncommon that these VFR aircraft are calling us up way too late, on a crowded frequency, after making own navigation turns that deteriorate safety before they can be acknowledged, identified, and properly controlled. The airspace in that area is also far too congested for the data tags to be sufficiently visible to controllers in order for them to recognize unsafe altitude/courses in time to effectively respond. The Point Mackenzie area is BY FAR the most unsafe chunk of airspace I have ever seen in my entire years of service to ATC. It needs to be overhauled and proceduralized entirely to prevent a catastrophic disaster which will never be appropriately mitigated by the pilots themselves.

Bravo airspace would be ideal to provide sufficient protection for the IFR traffic in and out of ANC. Falling short of Bravo airspace we need VFR transition procedures which are written to account for the IFR procedures, instead of simply letting VFR aircraft turn any direction they please without advisory/permission. Since the VFR aircraft ARE talking to ATC, coming from MRI, they are able to enter the Charlie airspace because they are already in it and simply have to wait their turns to "check in" with us, which can often times be WAY TOO LATE!

If this airspace is not dramatically altered soon, it is only a matter of time before a situation such as this is unable to be resolved by either pilot in time to prevent collision or catastrophic wake turbulence event. The lack of organization over the area, coupled with the FOUR different facilities servicing it, while aircraft are talking to different people or lost in frequency changes, and further complicated by additional aircraft who are

legally allowed to ignore ATC services entirely... it is simply unacceptable. It is beyond time to address this issue before it is too late. Head-on collision mitigation needs to be established with aircraft entering/exiting MRI airspace with aircraft verbally restricted to pass east of the strip BY DEFAULT until they are able to establish communications and RADAR contact with Approach for them to be ASSIGNED own navigation by Approach Control. Aircraft should not be permitted to turn westbound into the departure corridor without permission unless they are SPECIFICALLY on the "power line transition," which would keep them safe – MRI does not assign it but should.

Falling short of a Bravo airspace, the bottom of the vertical shelf which contains the Charlie airspace – northwest Charlie floor is 1400 ft. – needs to be lowered to 600 ft. in order to force aircraft around/underneath the departure corridors BY DEFAULT. Because it is only a matter of time before a slow climbing heavy aircraft calls Departure too late and passes through an unidentified VFR aircraft passing "underneath" the Charlie airspace in front of them without talking to ATC. Even if they do receive services, a situation such as the one above is a good example of how little time the controllers have to recognize, advise, and mitigate conflict within reason. Furthermore, the airspace delegation between NL and NR needs to be evaluated and changed to ensure that NL is required to pass off aircraft penetrating this departure corridor.

SYNOPSIS

A11 TRACON Controller reported a VFR aircraft unexpectedly turned into the path of a departing air carrier. The reporter stated IFR to VFR conflicts often occur in the busy airspace as there are multiple facilities and frequency changes in that area. Aircraft can also legally ignore ATC services entirely, which leads to even more disorganization. The sectors within the airspace also need to have clearer delegations so there is more time to maintain safe distance between aircraft.