San Francisco: Side-by-side Parallel Visual Approaches Banned

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On March 31, the FAA announced an important update for ops at **KSFO/San Francisco.**

The big news is that once work is complete on Runway 01R/19L, side-by-side parallel visual approaches will be permanently banned due to concerns over **separation**.

In fair weather conditions, this will effectively almost **halve arrival rates.** If you're used to carrying a little less fuel to the Golden City when the sun is out, now is the time consider **more**.

Here is the background to this significant change to **NORCAL** ops.

FAA warning.

A new statement issued by the FAA warns operators of **airborne delays.** The first reason is straight forward – Runway 01R/19L is currently closed until October due to repaving work.

But this isn't temporary.

When re-opened, the FAA will introduce a new safety measure which will **prohibit** side-by-side approaches to the parallel east-west runways in **clear weather.** Even if pilots acknowledge having each other in sight.

From October, visual approaches to parallel runways will be staggered.

Instead, approaches will be **staggered**, with one aircraft offset from the aircraft on the parallel runway.

This will essentially reduce arrival rates in VMC conditions to those typically experienced in IMC – from approx. **54 to 36 per hour.** It's an issue the FAA concedes will persist, at least until safer solutions are found.

But why the change?

A spokesman for the FAA confirmed that the change of rule came about from a regular quarterly quality-assurance review.

The core issue is that the **runway spacing is too tight.**

The parallel runways are only 750 ft apart. That's too close for independent parallel approaches under current FAA/ICAO standards.

So that leaves three options – space the runways out more (not practical), run precision monitoring systems (such as PRM) or, in the case of SFO, employ a workaround – the ol' **visual pairing trick** – *dependent visual approaches.*

In other words, pilots maintain visual separation from the aircraft ahead and adjacent.

In good weather, ATC have historically run these **side-by side.** This boosts capacity but pushes separation responsibility onto pilots rather than ATC systems.

With its announcement, the FAA is finally saying that the workaround doesn't meet modern safety standards anymore.

More broadly, the FAA's safety philosophy is shifting away from 'see-and-avoid' in high-density terminal airspace towards more reliance on automatic **ATC-based separation.**

It seems that a human-dependent workaround to help mitigate struggling infrastructure is no longer an acceptable answer.

Under the new rule, VMC arrival rates will be akin to IMC rates.

What is the practical impact?

Essentially, this is the end of SFO's visual 'capacity boost.'

In good weather, expect things to **slow down** much more than you're used to. This includes longer finals, lengthier vectors, speed control and a greater chance of holding.

These impacts won't be evenly spread. Expect the **biggest delays** during peak arrival periods, late afternoons/evenings or adjacent to weather related disruptions as it will be harder for ATC to play catch up when the weather improves.

For planning purposes, the main takeaways are to **carry more fuel in fair weather conditions, a**nd not to underestimate potential for delays. This is especially relevant for BizAv ops that have historically relied on visual arrivals to 'keep things tight.'

Where to from here?

In its statement, the FAA confirmed that it is actively seeking new ways to boost arrival flows **safely** – we'll need to wait a little longer for those.