

Ramp Inspections and Repercussions



Ramp inspections are a normal part of FAA surveillance. Yeah, “surveillance” sounds sinister, like there are Feds in a white van outside your house, but it’s no different from any other compliance monitoring. You can play the odds and hope it never happens or you can use the possibility as incentive to make sure your aircraft house is in order.

- There’s a playbook that the Feds follow and it’s no secret. It’s a part of FAA Order 8900.1 and it’s pretty straightforward.
- The Feds (inspectors) can’t open or board your aircraft without consent, but they can observe it on the ramp and look in the windows.
- Ramp inspections can happen because of observed or reported unsafe conditions, or as a part of more general surveillance.
- Inspections (and the individual Feds who perform them) come in two general flavors: **operational** and **airworthiness**.
- The results of the inspection can be anything from a compliment and a handshake to a tag with bad things written on it that effectively grounds the aircraft.
- Special flight permits (“ferry permits”) can help you get the aircraft from the ramp where the inspection happened to another place where you can address discrepancies.

- Feds sometimes get things wrong, including discrepancies. However, think long and hard before operating an aircraft that a Fed has tagged without addressing the discrepancies.
- Don’t pencil-whip records or lie to the federal government. Just don’t.
- Nobody likes meeting the friendly Fed on the ramp but understand that the Fed is performing a duty that really does make aviation safer.

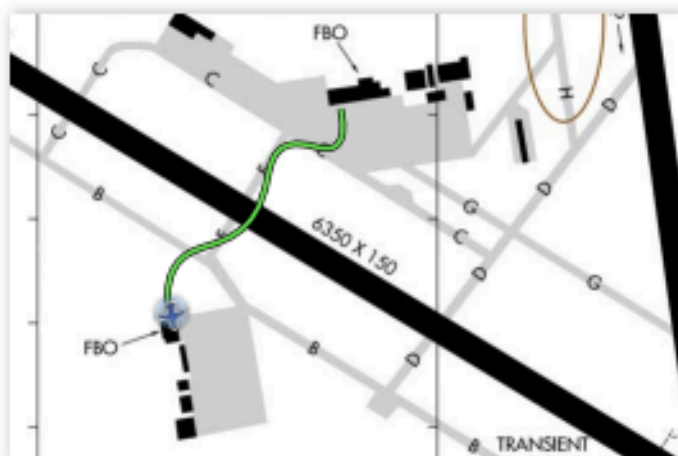
What did I do to deserve a ramp inspection?

Feds perform ramp inspections (a.k.a. “ramp checks”) for many reasons. They include observation of an unsafe operation in the traffic pattern or on the ramp, a report from ATC of an unsafe operation, and observation of an obvious discrepancy that might affect the airworthiness of an aircraft.

An inspection might also result from routine surveillance activities. That might include circumstances where you or the aircraft have developed a reputation with the Flight Standards District Office (FSDO) through reports, complaints, or other indications that it might be a good idea to look in on you or the aircraft. There are even a few random inspections, but they are few and far between.

What happens in an operational inspection?

Operational inspections are mostly about the pilot and the operation that’s being conducted. Under **Part 91**, it’s mostly about the pilot. The inspector must have their FAA credentials and present them to you.



Step one in avoiding an inspection is not engaging in behavior that invites an inspection.

Most likely, the inspector will kick off the conversation with the credentials.

You'll likely be asked who's flying (or who flew) and be asked for the documents that you've known since your private checkride that you're supposed to have on you, namely your airman certificate(s), your government-issued photo ID, your medical (if applicable), and any other required pilot documents.

The inspector might ask for the pilot's logbook to verify that the pilot is current for the operations performed or to be performed, mainly the takeoffs and landings, instrument approaches, and similar matters. Other than student pilots, sport pilots, and certain recreational pilots, you don't have to have your logbook physically with you, but you might be asked to follow up with the Fed to provide logbook entries showing the required currency. Likewise, if you're flying on BasicMed, you don't have to carry your BasicMed documents with you, but you should

FAA Order 8900.1 is a treasure trove of information about the Feds and how they work. You'll find FAA guidance and job aids for nearly every function that a Fed might perform, from conducting an inspection to granting a waiver for an airshow. In the rare event that you need to push back against "well, my guidance says ...", 8900.1 can help you and the Fed get (literally) on the same page. The FAA's Dynamic Regulatory System (where 8900.1 lives) can be difficult to navigate, but rewarding to those who browse it. Do not operate heavy machinery when reading 8900.1 until you know how fast it puts you to sleep.

RAMP INSPECTION

According to the FAA guidance, "a ramp inspection is defined as surveillance of an airman, operator, air agency, or aircraft, which may include conducting maintenance record inspections ... sufficient to show compliance with [the regulations] during actual operations at an airport or heliport."

Generally speaking, there are *operational* ramp inspections and *airworthiness* ramp inspections. And the standard (or the way of going about either or both types) is divided up according to the kinds of operations involved (**Parts 91, 121, 125, 135**, etc.). This chapter will assume a **Part 91** ramp inspection, the kind that you're most likely to encounter as a GA driver.

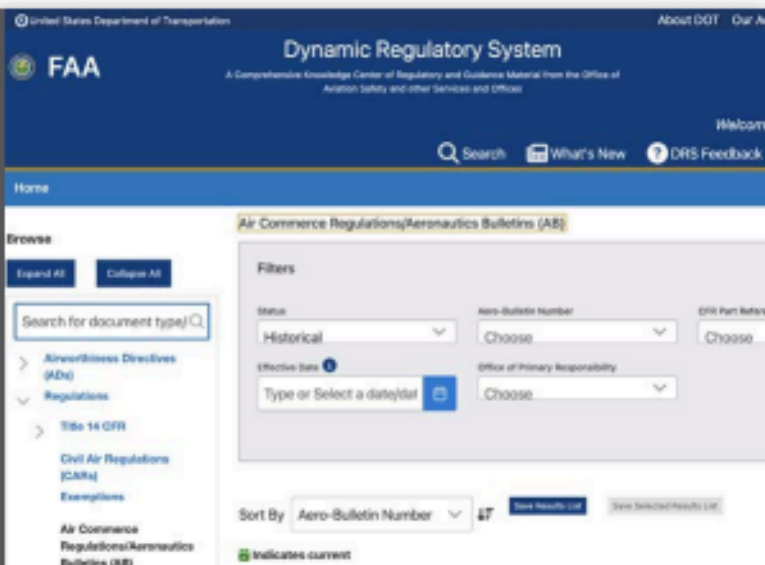
Part 91 inspections are covered in **FAA Order 8900.1, Vol. 6, Ch. 1, Sec. 4**.

be prepared to provide them if asked. You can usually print out a wallet card showing completion of the on-line training if you want to have something easy on your person. All that said, never lie and say you don't have something with you if you actually do.

Also know the inspector probably won't be able to complete the whole job-aid checklist, and that usually works in your favor.

What happens in an airworthiness inspection?

Remember ARROW from your private pilot study sessions? Be prepared to show all of that stuff (although you'll only need the second "R" if you fly out-



TIP It's a myth that an inspector can confiscate your certificate, or that handing it to them to look at it equals surrendering it.

side the U.S.). If you have any special circumstances, such as a copy of the **FAA Form AC 8050-1** instead of the regular registration because you recently purchased the aircraft, you'll need to be able to produce those documents.

Other materials that most pilots don't think much about can cause headaches. Most GA airplanes flying today have FAA-required Airplane Flight Manuals (AFMs) or Pilot's Operating Handbooks (POHs), which must be aboard the aircraft and accessible by the pilot. Digital versions of those documents ought to be fine as long as they're immediately accessible in flight (e.g., on an iPad, not on a USB thumb drive). But the documents must be the officially required documents. A mere manufacturer's owner's guide, paper, digital, or otherwise, that doesn't meet those requirements won't cut the mustard.

It's fair game for an inspector to ask about airworthiness directives (ADs), life-limited parts, and similar matters that you probably can't answer without the aircraft logbooks. You're unlikely to have those handy, so the inspector might ask you to provide that information after the actual ramp inspection.



Many upgrades and modifications (usually under the STC or 337 process) require the addition of supplementary information to the AFM/POH. Have you added a couple of G5s and a GNC 355 to your trusty Tomahawk? Have you installed aftermarket extended-range fuel tanks? The relevant supplements must be accessible in the cockpit so that you can refer to them in flight if necessary.



If you have an uncommon aircraft, the Fed might inspect it despite being unfamiliar with it.

Be prepared to explain any non-obvious things about an uncommon aircraft. For example, many inspectors aren't familiar with gap-seal tape use on many gliders, especially self-launch gliders. It's fun, but not advisable, to yell "Hey! Don't mess with that tape. It's the only thing holding the wing on!"

Are you likely to walk back out onto the ramp after lunch to find a Fed sticking halfway into your baggage door? Nope. The FAA guidance specifically says that "[a]n inspector must not open or board any aircraft without the knowledge and consent of the crew or owner/operator." But the Fed is probably fine observing the aircraft on the ramp and can probably look in the windows.

Do I have to submit to a ramp inspection?

Yes and no.

It's pretty clear that the Feds have the authority to inspect anything about a pilot or aircraft: **61.3(l)** requires that "[e]ach person who holds an airman certificate, [temporary certificate], medical certificate, documents establishing alternative medical qualification [like BasicMed or sport pilot privileges], authorization, or license required by [Part 91] must present it and their [government-issued] photo identification for inspection upon a request" by Feds and some other personnel.

Additionally, **49 USC § 44709(a)(1)** says that the FAA "may reinspect at any time a civil aircraft, aircraft engine, propeller, appliance, design organization, production certificate holder, air navigation facility, or air agency, or reexamine an airman holding a certificate ..."

The practical issue becomes not *whether*, but *when* and *how*. There's little guidance on this, but here are some pretty good guesses.