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Private VFR pilots should use every available resource to build a big picture of the weather – but watch out for the fish-hooks in web cams and unofficial weather sources.

There is no substitute for a MetFlight GA briefing.

The pre-flight meteorological information that Part 121, 125, and 135 operators (small, medium and large airlines) use, must come from a Part 174 *Aviation Meteorological Service Organisations – Certification* organisation. Currently, MetService is the only organisation certificated by the CAA to provide this. But as a private pilot (operating under Part 91 *General Operating and Flight Rules*), you can supplement your MetFlight GA briefing with information from additional sources. However, you must consider the pros and cons.

Weather information is all around you. Television, radio, the internet – web cams are also a popular source of recent visual weather information. Provided the information is current, all sources of weather information can be used to help you build the big picture.

You can begin this process several days before you intend to fly by seeking out other sources of weather information – in addition to what is available on the MetFlight GA web site. This will help you see the general trend.

By studying the weather four or five days out, you can get a feel for whether your flight will even be possible. If it's not looking good, you have time to come up with plans B, C, and D. They may be: moving your flight forward a day, delaying it a day, or taking the car instead.

A good source of longer range information are MetService's seven-day and three-day rain forecasts, available at www.metservice.com.

Long-range forecasts are also available on the MetVUW.com web site. This is run by Dr James McGregor, Senior Lecturer in Meteorology at Wellington's Victoria University. If you use this source, be aware that Victoria University does not hold a Part 174 certificate, so it cannot provide meteorological information specifically for aviation purposes. It is primarily run as a study and research platform, and its graphics should not be relied on to the same extent as a Part 174 certificate holder's forecasts.

Dr McGregor says the data is obtained from the United States National Weather Service.

"These charts are updated approximately every six hours and provide forecasts up to 180 hours ahead of the time they were issued. Clearly reliability will decline with the length of the forecast. We wouldn't advise anyone to take the seven-day forecasts literally, but hope that these longer forecasts will provide some useful indication of how things might develop. They are not intended for use in making life or death decisions."

For flight-planning purposes, it is safest to use long range forecasts issued by MetService. It is important to analyse trends in the weather on the day of your flight, as well as a few days before. A good way of doing this is to compare the last six or so METARs for your destination, with what the TAF says will be happening, to see if any forecast changes are occurring earlier, later, or at the time they were forecast to occur. Looking at the MetService's weather maps for 0600, 1200, and 1800 that day will also show you the trend.



metflight.metra.co.nz

On the day of your flight, area forecasts (ARFORs) from MetFlight GA will give you the upper level wind speed and direction for each area. By looking at these winds, you can find the best cruising level. To work out whether you can maintain VMC at that level, however, requires careful study of cloud base information available from MetFlight GA.

Web cameras can be a good source of additional information, but be careful. Always check how current the information is. Check the date and time stamp on web cam pictures, and don't use any source if you cannot verify when it was issued.

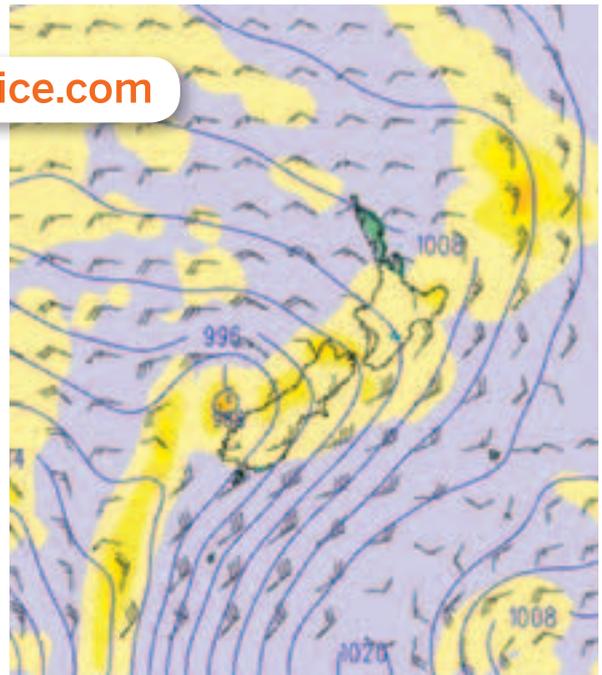
Also be wary of cameras that only point in one direction. It may look like a beautiful day, but there could be a big black front right behind the camera. Web sites with cameras pointing in several directions, or with cameras that you can manipulate yourself, are the best. Here is one good example.

The Tekapo Tourism web site, www.tekapotourism.com, not only has multiple cameras each showing views in multiple directions, it also has an interactive live video camera, that allows you to select from 20 preset views and watch while the camera moves to that view.

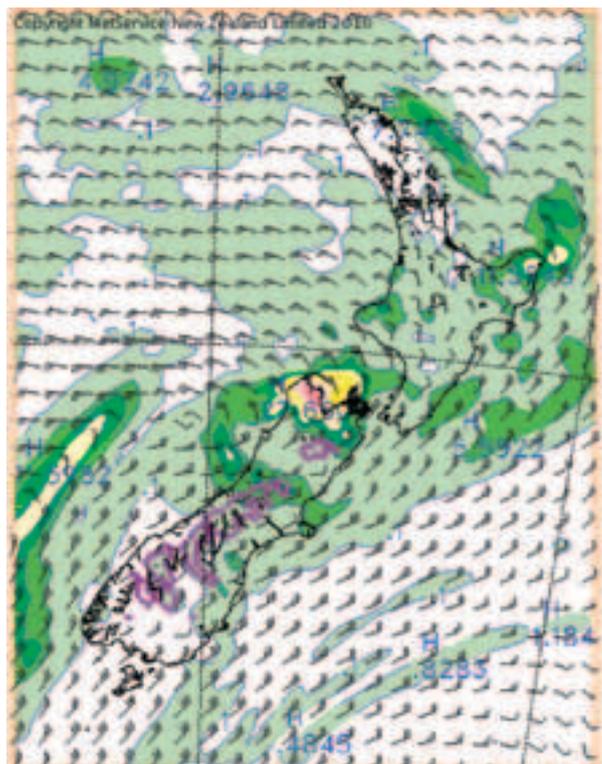
Depth of field characteristics sometimes mean that mist, light rain, or low visibility, does not show up in the picture. Personally assess each web site on its merits – don't just rely on the recommendations of others.

Another way you can get additional weather information is to make phone calls to contacts along your intended route. While flying, you can ask Christchurch Information if they know of any aircraft along your intended route who you could contact to ask for a Pilot Report (PIREP). While you cannot put the onus on them, any information they can give will help your decision. ■

The web address for MetFlight GA is <http://metflight.metra.co.nz>



A MetService seven-day rain forecast chart.



A MetService three-day rain forecast chart.