

## Pilots face on-the-ground challenges at busy airports

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Runway collisions are not unique to LaGuardia Airport, but they occur with alarming frequency at the nation's airports and pose a special hazard for pilots landing and departing at the busiest urban airfields, a local aviation expert said Monday.

Accidents on runways involving planes, vehicles and pedestrians are "absolutely at the top end of things that terrify pilots," said Michael Canders, a pilot and associate professor of aviation at Farmingdale State College.

He added runway safety "has become a hot topic in the world of aviation."

Two pilots were killed late Sunday night when a regional Air Canada plane struck a firefighting vehicle on a LaGuardia runway, according to the Port Authority.

While The Associated Press reported that LaGuardia control tower recordings indicate the truck was authorized to cross the runway as it responded to an emergency, many runway accidents at U.S. airports involve vehicles and pedestrians that did not receive prior clearance, according to an FAA report released last year.

Those so-called runway "incursions" can and do happen anywhere, as pilots navigate an array of activity on the ground while airport staff crisscross tarmacs to handle baggage, deliver fuel and perform other tasks, Canders said.

He noted that incidents on runways "occur around the world" but are more likely at busy airports like LaGuardia, Kennedy and Newark Liberty International Airport.

"This is very congested airspace," Canders said. "Pilots operating in and out of these airports have to be at the top of their game. They have to anticipate the worst.

"What further complicates this is nighttime. At nighttime, it's very hard to differentiate different lights at the airport," he said.

The Federal Aviation Administration report last year was prompted by runway incidents in 2023 and 2024 at major airports, including two at Kennedy.

The report found that 1,758 runway incursions had been reported nationwide in fiscal year 2024. That was an increase of almost 12% from fiscal year 2021 but was nearly the same as the number of reported incidents in fiscal year 2019, the FAA said.

The report said runway incidents were "a longstanding challenge for the Federal Aviation Administration and the aviation industry" and it recommended improved communication and technology enhancements throughout the industry.

Last October saw two separate runway collisions involving aircraft at LaGuardia.

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On Oct. 1, two planes operated by a subsidiary of Delta Air Lines had a "low-speed collision" on a taxiway. Both planes were damaged and a flight attendant was injured, officials said at the time.

Thirty days later, two United Airlines planes carrying a total of 343 people collided at LaGuardia. No injuries were reported.

Canders did not want to jump to conclusions about Sunday's fatal collision, but he said communication is key to avoiding accidents. He said his message to students about runway accidents is: "If there's any doubt, overcommunicate."

"I will be in the classroom in 45 minutes and this will be the first thing we talk about," he said Monday morning, referring to the Sunday night crash. "We do a lot of accident study. ... These are lessons learned. Maybe there will be changes."

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