

13. Class E – advantages still not available in Australia

Class E is a unique airspace and requires quite a cultural change if the safety benefits are to be optimised. When instrument conditions exist – that is, in bad weather – it is a fully controlled airspace in the same way as Class A. The pilot must comply with air traffic control directions. However when visual conditions exist – that is, in good weather – the pilot may elect to cancel Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) and fly visually and uncontrolled. This means that Class E airspace has the advantages of Class A controlled airspace when instrument conditions exist, and the advantages of Class G uncontrolled airspace when visual conditions exist.

In Australia pilots have not been able to use these advantages because of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority’s bureaucratic resistance to change. Its officers, who are professional pilots who have flown for decades in the old system, have steadfastly refused to allow the regulations to be updated so that the airspace can be used as it is in other modern aviation countries. For this reason many pilots and controllers oppose Class E airspace.

If you remember from the diagram, we originally only had controlled airspace and uncontrolled in Australia. It is quite a cultural leap for pilots and air traffic controllers to accept that the most common form of airspace for instrument flight rules aircraft throughout the world is Class E. It can change from being controlled to uncontrolled depending on weather conditions and the pilot’s decision.

Our Class E airspace is the safest in the world as all aircraft – both the small Visual Flight Rules aircraft and the larger Instrument Flight Rules planes – must have an altitude reporting transponder. This “black box” not only sends the aircraft’s position and altitude to the radar controller in radar airspace, but also sends the aircraft’s position and altitude to a special safety device that is installed in all airline aircraft.



Called “TCAS” (Traffic Alert and Collision Avoidance System), it will show on a small screen (pictured) not only the location of nearby transponder equipped aircraft, but it will also automatically advise the airline crew to climb or descend to prevent a collision. No airline aircraft has ever been involved in a mid-air collision when following the instructions of this extraordinary safety device.

I’m particularly proud of this safety feature because as CASA Chairman, I personally brokered the agreement with the industry associations which allowed the introduction of this mandatory requirement for transponders in Class E.