Cloud Flying – 2015 Note from Competition and Awards Committee.

The practice of cloud flying in BGA rated competitions has been the subject of discussion over many years; this document is an attempt to summarise the sporting implications relating to fairness. The comps committee would like to invite feedback through the competition forums and the online survey on the BGA website in 2015 to understand the views of competition movement in relation to the sporting fairness of cloud flying in competition. This information will then be gathered and used in further discussions. To help guide and facilitate the discussion we've listed below what we think are the key pros and cons of cloud flying:

Waiting time – pilots must wait when in a group to enter cloud from base to meet the current required minimum separation requirements at least on entry – so one pilot's action is dependent on another's and has a direct influence on that waiting pilot's score – such sporting advantage is often enhanced due to widespread tactics where pilots first in supply possibly inaccurate radio data such that any tactical advantage gained is maximised or a waiting pilot ultimately decides that waiting is not a best option based on likely time delay for a perceived safe situation to allow cloud entry.

Airworthiness – when in a group it is not realistically possible to dump water before entering cloud due to the aerodynamic influence on others holding or climbing below however, no glider may be flown in cloud with water in order to meet airworthiness requirements. Some gliders are prohibited from flying in cloud with or without ballast.

Task completion - there are occasions when tasks cannot be completed without entering cloud. This gives those whose gliders are permitted to climb in cloud a sporting advantage over those who are not.

Control at Turning Points – as control is by GPS flight recorder and not by visual means, potentially pilots may transit to a turning point in cloud especially when the inbound and outbound track form an acute angle or when a cloud street leads into a turn point, thus increasing the collision risk. Whilst radio protocol requires pilots to give their position and height reference, this is very hard for pilots to assess, especially when gliders are transiting in cloud rather than at a fixed location when circling. The result is that pilots often have to decide whether to relinquish an obvious tactical advantage and not enter cloud depending on their perception of risk based on the number of gliders already in cloud tracking into a turn point. This tends to result in the sporting advantage for pilots already in cloud being maximised.

Team selection from Nationals performance – British team selection is based on pilot performance in Nationals events. Situations where cloud flying occurs can produce massive tactical and hence points advantage. Cloud flying is prohibited in International events – pilots that are selected, potentially may not therefore always be those best able to perform in this alternative strategic environment and so possibly compromising team success.

Collision Risk – there have been a number of incidents involving gliders getting close to each other and even seeing and passing each other in cloud despite the minimum entry protocol being respected by all pilots. Problems occur when a number of pilots are climbing in the same cloud and in the situation as outlined above near turn points. In the case of climbing in the same cloud, pilots understandably tend to enter with the minimum height separation to minimize tactical disadvantage and a pilot higher up often loses the core and either stops climbing or has reduced climb rate. Because climb rates can be extreme in cloud, it is relatively easy to use up the 500 feet minimum height separation well before pilots can report status of the possible danger and a decision is made by one pilot or another to leave the cloud.

Flying in cloud in accordance with airworthiness requirements is not dangerous in itself for a single pilot with suitable training in operating their gliders in this environment. However, risk to safety would be increased with several pilots climbing in cloud in a particular location.

The Competitions Committee consider that in the light of the arguments above, while cloud flying is a skill worthy of being tested and occasionally set tasks cannot be completed without entering cloud, on balance sporting fairness is better achieved in the absence of cloud flying. We would like to receive feedback from pilots on any other arguments for or against cloud flying, its impact on sporting fairness and ways to improve this going forwards.

BGA Competition and Awards Sub-committee