

WSI PILOTBRIEF'S REVENGE

Could a fee-based weather service be worth the cost to a GA pilot when there's so much free weather data online? WSI thinks so, and we think they may be right.

Go to the pilot briefing room of most any FBO and you'll find a dual-computer architecture: some Windows XP box for slogging through web pages and the traditional WSI Pilotbrief station. Which do pilots use? You need a web browser for good stuff like Fltplan.com and ADDS. But for a quick check of radar or TFRs, you'll watch them queuing up to Pilotbrief time and again.

Pilotbrief online, however, has been losing ground to the wealth of free stuff, so WSI has reinvented it as Pilotbrief Optima. "Optima is the result of our leveraging new technology," says Paul Devlin of WSI. "We're changing the briefing paradigm that's chart-based to one that's more route-based. We want to bring the route to the fore."

Of course, you'll have to pay for this

route-based stuff. But even if you're not interested in parting with one extra penny, you should check out the new Optima home page anyway (www.pilotbrief.com/Optima/). It's still a good place for high-res versions of the latest radar or other major weather charts, and METAR/TAFs for airports worldwide.

Layers of Weather

The big news in Optima, and where that route-based idea plays out, is in the interactive weather map. It can be summed up in one word: layers. Drop-downs from the top of the map let you choose from up to 23 potential layers of weather data. Each layer you add gets a control box from a separate pop-up menu on the lower-right of the display. This lets you change the opacity of each

one, turn it off or even just drag one up or down in the list to change the stacking order on map.

The settings are "sticky." Let's suppose you like to see METARs, TFRs and NEXRAD (WSI calls their version NOWRAD), storm tops and movement as a default. Choose and arrange those layers and quit the website. When you return, those are the layers you'll see at startup. WSI will eventually allow you to save preset groups of views to change a bunch of them at once.

Enter your departure, destination and alternate and you'll get choices similar to what you see on Fltplan.com of recently filed and ATC-assigned routes between those points. Choose a route, make one of your own, or go direct and the map zooms to show that route with overlaid weather. Actually, the route is just another layer, so you can put it under, over or between any weather data you want.

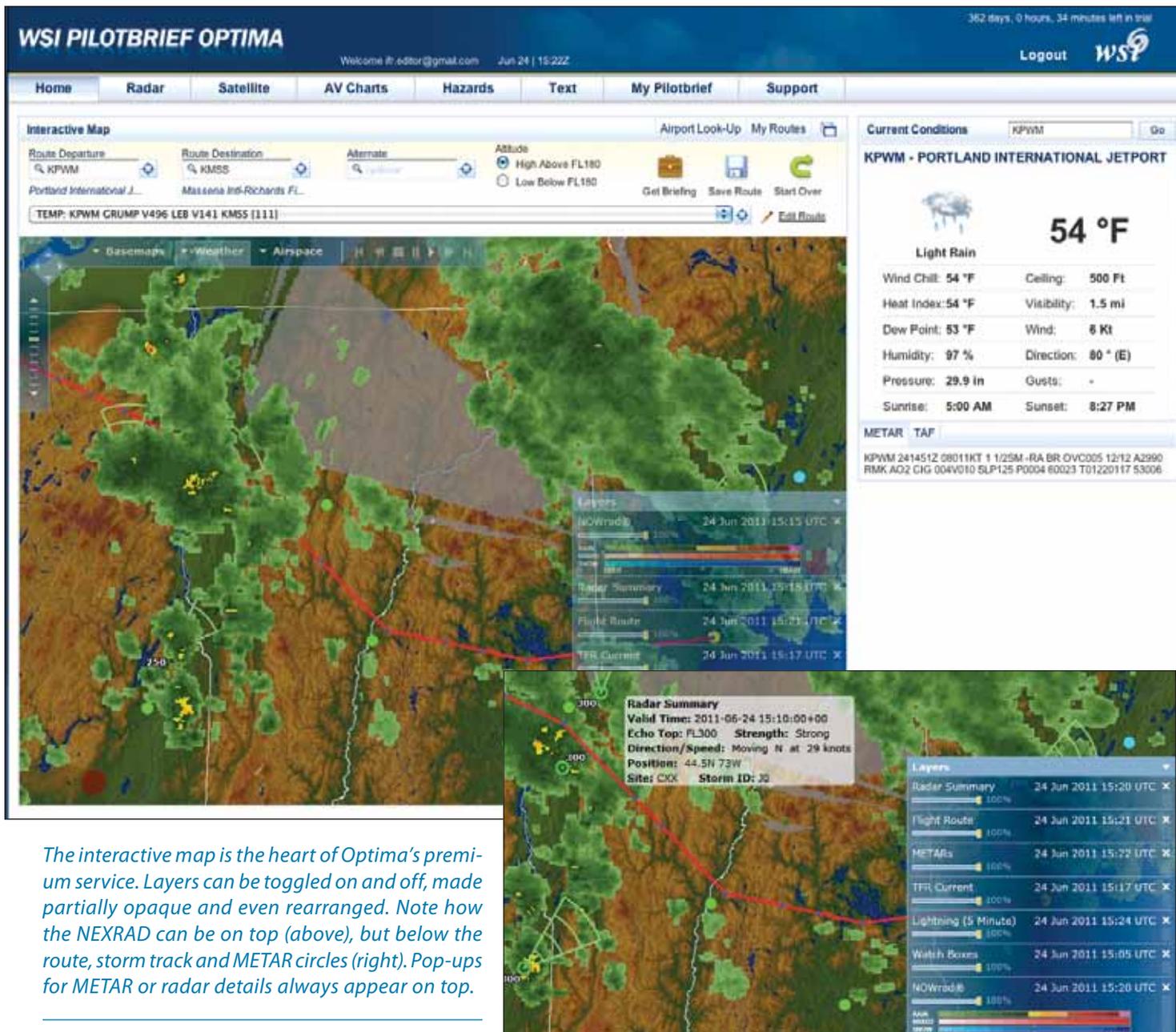
You can quickly toggle to a standard briefing with enhanced organization and decoding. Printing to PDF is a snap.

The screenshot displays the WSI Pilotbrief Optima interface for a flight from KPWM to KMSS. The route is GRUMP V496 LEB V141. The interface includes a legend for weather conditions (VFR, MVFR, IFR, LIFR, <CAT1), a table of weather conditions for the past, current, and forecast, and a table of nearby airports. The right side of the interface shows a list of METARs and TAFs for the route, with options to show or decode them. The TAFs section includes detailed weather forecasts for the route.

Past	Current	Forecast				
13Z 14Z	15Z	16Z				
●	●	●				
KPWM (Departure)						
	Nearby	Bearing	Distance			
●	●	●	KPSM	214°	41NM	●
●	●	●	KALG	28°	46NM	●
METAR	METAR					TAF

Current	Forecast					
15Z	16Z 01Z					
●	●					
KMSS (Destination)						
	Nearby	Bearing	Distance			
●	●	●	CYOW	304°	42NM	●
●	●	●	KSLK	140°	43NM	●
●	●	●	CYND	319°	40NM	●
METAR						TAF

This table is intended to be advisory. Please review the full content of the briefing for a complete briefing of the weather along this route.



The interactive map is the heart of Optima's premium service. Layers can be toggled on and off, made partially opaque and even rearranged. Note how the NEXRAD can be on top (above), but below the route, storm track and METAR circles (right). Pop-ups for METAR or radar details always appear on top.

The layering becomes even more powerful with some of WSI's proprietary products. For example, you can overlay both their HD radar and HD echo tops to see where the stuff is both vertically and laterally. Or you could compare the radar with HD VIL (vertically integrated liquid) to get a better feel for how much power a particular area of moderate returns really has. HD means one-kilometer resolution and is for the CONUS only. Another WSI product is Flight Plan Guidance (FPG), which predicts the future position of hazard areas like Convective SIGMETs. Overlaid on your route, this becomes a powerful tool.

Many layers animate, and, hopefully by September, the NOWRAD animation

will continue into a forecast mode. This will show you projected positions and projected intensities of the storms. The plan is for 24-hour NEXRAD forecast, although WSI's model can make best guesses up to 52 hours out. Other future enhancements will include PIREPs on the map.

While the animations are the standard, blocky motion you'd expect, the zoom, pan and layering of the map is shockingly smooth for a web app. WSI uses Microsoft's Silverlight browser plug-in to make this work. Be sure you have the latest version or the map may not work at all. Tip for Macs: Use Google's Chrome browser for Optima. It seems to work best.

Because you have a route, it's a one-click operation to get a briefing. Optima cleans this data up a bit, too, mostly through organization. There are departure, en route and destination sections, all with subsections that expand and collapse. I'm a fan of the number by each section so you can see how many items are hidden inside. Why waste time expanding the NOTAM section for an airport only to find there aren't any? Speaking of NOTAMs, Optima organizes and decodes those as well.

World Centric

The other striking thing about the interactive map is its worldwide. Zoom in on Europe and you'll get WSI's weather data

AVweb+

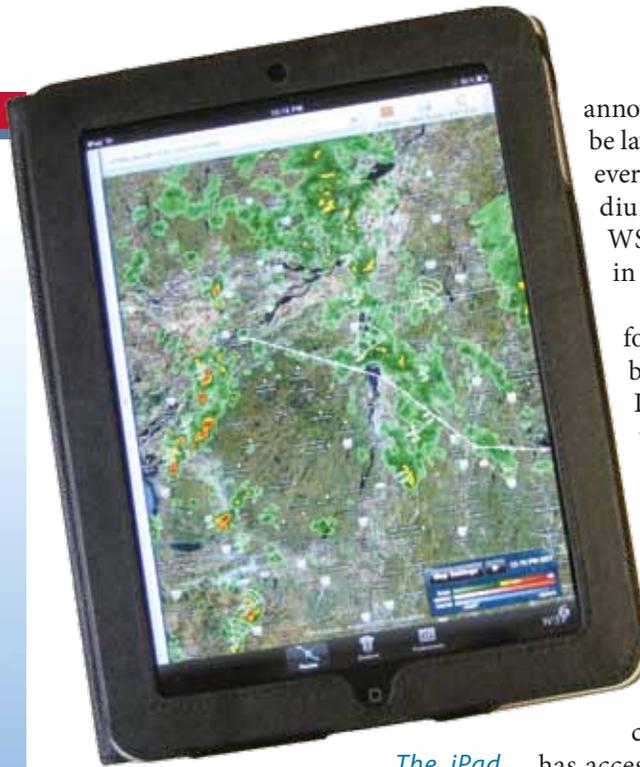
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The iPad version is similar to the free Intellicast app. It only shows one layer of data, but has Optima's briefing features and accesses your saved routes. There's also a station and briefing view.

for northern Portugal just like you'd see for northern California. Well, not exactly the same, because radar resolution and available data vary across countries. But the company is working to blend all this in one worldwide interface. The results look promising.

Closer to the U.S., one of the airspace layers is the Gulf of Mexico (GOMEX), including the ASOS stations out on the Gulf. Alaskan data is quite extensive and Alaska Airlines is using Optima. Several other airlines are looking at it.

The worldview extends outside the home page and its interactive map. Clicking on any of the other sections—Radar, Satellite, AV charts, Hazards—brings up more traditional charts, but there's a drop-down menu for region. So if you're flying in the Caribbean or S.E. Asia, you can browse all the charts available for your region, many of which are also animated. Region is "sticky" like your preferences on the interactive map.

Work in Progress

So far, we've found only a few bugs or

annoyances with Optima. TFRs can be layered on the map, but it shows every last one, including every stadium and nuclear power plant. WSI says these will be filterable in a future version.

We'd like to see current and forecast icing as a weather layer, but that is still in the works. Devlin says that it may be a while yet, as most of their customers are flight-level fliers and high significant weather upgrades have priority. But icing for all is on the short list. Likewise is a winds aloft layer.

There's also an iPad app. Only one layer of weather can be shown at a time, but it has access to your stored routes, so it makes a nice compliment to the desktop version of Optima. There's no charge for the app and it uses the same account credentials as the desktop Optima.

There is a significant charge for Optima overall. It's \$39/month for the North America service area or \$58/month for global service (\$84/month for global with en route hazards and global lightning). Optima is good, but \$468/year for weather in North America is steep, given how much is available free online.

For world travelers, or specialty users such as commercial operations far into the Gulf, this equation may make more sense. WSI also offers bundle pricing. Five partners in a plane would only pay \$99/mo total for all five logins. This could become more worth the cost as products like forecast NEXRAD and icing come online. We'll be trying Optima here at the magazine over the next year, so we'll let you know what we think.

Optima in a kiosk version will also replace the existing WSI terminals in FBOs across the country. So even if you're keeping all your spare pennies and don't subscribe yourself, it might become your friend the next time you walk into the FBO. | IFR

Jeff Van West is editor of IFR.