

John Rolfson

LifeFlight of Maine's Aviation Infrastructure Engineer

For Albion, Maine native John Rolfson “going to work” might mean driving North to the Canadian border, riding an ATV to a mountaintop, or even flying into a dirt airstrip in South America. But wherever he goes, he takes equipment, tools, and as many parts as he can carry. “I learned that the hard way,” Rolfson says.

As LifeFlight of Maine's Aviation Infrastructure Engineer, it's Rolfson's job to maintain the systems and structures that make it safe for pilots to fly and transport critically ill patients across rugged and rural Maine. This includes working with hospitals to maintain their helipads, supporting airports, overseeing LifeFlight's facilities, and assisting with a low altitude performance-based navigation (PBN) procedures and routes system being created jointly by LifeFlight and the FAA. This unique role is critically important, especially given the complex aviation weather in Maine.

Rolfson is currently in the midst of a major project to install 35 runway cameras, yet it is his work with weather stations that is the most demanding of his time. Located on runways and helipads around the state, LifeFlight's 16 Automated Weather Observation Systems (AWOS) transmit real-time data including wind speed and direction, temperature, cloud cover and visibility - critical information pilots rely on every time they make a flight plan or approach a runway or helipad, especially as LifeFlight uses Instrument Flight where operations are in the clouds and there is no visibility of the ground.

“They get beat up pretty badly by the weather and wind, especially the ones out on the islands,” says Rolfson. As a result, he inspects every weather station three times a year and because many of the stations are nearing the end of their useful lives, he does a lot of repair calls as well, which is why he carries so many parts. “You don't want to be out on Vinalhaven in the middle of winter and discover that you've forgotten something.”

“The learning curve for this job was significant,” says Rolfson, who studied Engineering, Physics, and Elementary Education at the University of Maine. “But the variety and spontaneity of any given day is great. It's a privilege to travel around this beautiful state and complete such meaningful work.”

