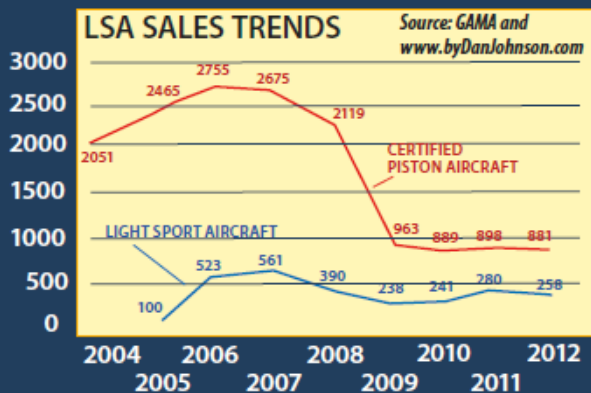


# LSA: NOT THE GREAT WINGED HOPE

As Cessna stumbles backward away from light sport production, the rest of the industry shambles forward with steady if not robust sales. The industry itself is proving to be a mixed bag, but one that hasn't delivered the aviation growth many expected of it.

General aviation has been losing between 10,000 and 12,000 pilots a year to demographic attrition and an economy that doesn't encourage aircraft ownership or even flight training.

According to the EAA and FAA,



there are, at last count, about 4724 active sport pilots; that is, pilots holding sport certificates, but not counting private, commercial or ATPs who fly as sport pilots, having decided to drop medical renewals. No one really knows how many of them there are, but some LSA manufacturers say these so-called full-circle pilots represent the bulk of their new aircraft sales. Keeping them in light sport airplanes may minimize erosion of the pilot population, but it doesn't spark growth.

Aircraft production—as tracked by U.S. registrations—is similarly murky. FAA data shows 2070 S-LSA aircraft and, according to EAA, an additional 700 or so E-LSAs or former S-LSAs put into experimental status. In addition, there are more than 6000 so-called “fat ultralights” that aren't really LSAs but do exist in the registry.

Summarizing, since the light sport rule went into effect in the U.S. in 2004, the industry has

averaged between 200 and 300 new airframes a year, including E-LSA. While that doesn't sound like much, it looks more impressive when compared to the number of certified piston aircraft delivered in recent years. In 2012, the industry delivered 881 piston aircraft, according to GAMA. The 250 or so LSAs delivered represent nearly 30 percent of that and may represent at least some industry expansion, since those LSA buyers probably wouldn't have been tempted to buy a certified aircraft.

Interestingly, although LSA sales may not have reached the stratospheric levels many had hoped for, the segment may be stimulating sales of certified aircraft by serving as a gateway to the PPL, just as

some people predicted. Several of the schools we interviewed told us the majority of their LSA trainees sidestep into certified aircraft and obtain the private or higher ratings.

“For us, that's been about 70 percent of the students,” says J.A. Air Center's Jim Whitt. “I think the light sport rating is strictly a niche and a little niche. They find out the effort in getting the light sport is so great, they go for the private,” Whitt adds.

Name recognition plays a role, too, according to Tim Chase at Premier Flight Center in Hartford, Connecticut. Premier has a Flight Design CTLS, but it doesn't get flown as much as other aircraft do. “People Google around and they see 172 this and 172 that, and that's what they end up flying,” he says. The school has done a few LSA completions, but like J.A. Air Center, it tilts toward private certificates.