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PILATUS

NEIL CHRISTENSEN
AGE 47:59
BIRTHDATE 1964
HGT. 5'11" WGT. 180



POWERED BY PILATUS

WHAT CAN BIZAV DO FOR YOU?

Contest winner flies dream flights to grow his business

WITH TWO GUYS LIFTING, the black plastic tub slides into the yawning cargo doorway of the Pilatus PC-12 NG with just a shove, filling the space usually occupied by a seat. Steve Bilson steps back for a look and says, admiringly, “Like it was made for there.” Pilatus Chief Pilot Jed Johnson pushes a button on the side of the sleek single-engine turboprop, and the door quietly closes. Johnson latches the big door, and it’s time to load passengers for the next leg of our adventure: helping Bilson fulfill his dream business aviation flights in support of his company, ReWater Systems.

BY THOMAS B. HAINES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER



VIDEO EXTRA Climb aboard the PC-12 with Steve Bilson as he puts business aviation to work for his company.

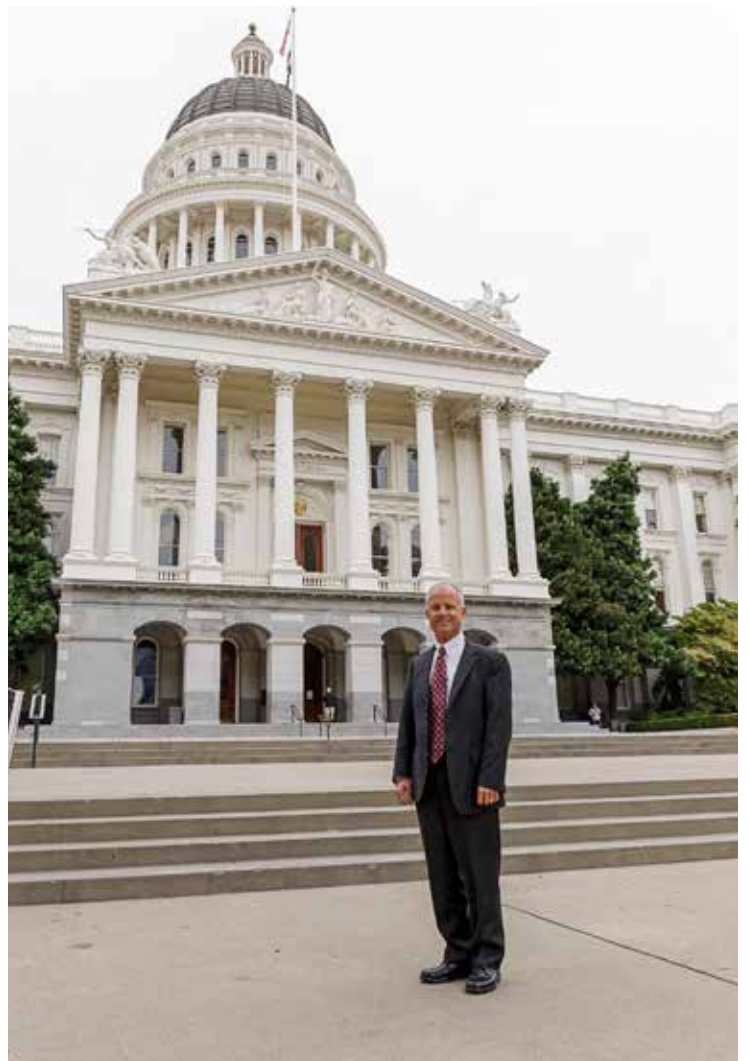
Bilson's 300-word entry in the AOPA BizAv and You Contest, powered by Pilatus, won him the chance to learn how a capable business aircraft could make a difference in his burgeoning business. "I've followed Pilatus for years and I've been aspiring to it for years—to be able to fly one like that," he says, pointing to the brightly painted airplane. "I was like, 'Really, I won?'"

PILATUS CHIEF PILOT Jed Johnson (below, right) and Vice President of Marketing Tom Aniello lift a ReWater Systems tank and filter system into the PC-12 NG's gaping cargo door. Contest winner Steve Bilson regularly visits the California capitol to advocate for the use of greywater irrigation systems. The gang's all here (facing page). For flights crisscrossing California, the PC-12 NG swallowed all the gear on the ramp, plus five of the six in the photo and photographer Mike Fizer: (Left to right) Roger Bent, the author, ReWater's research and development consultant Eric Franke, Steve Bilson, Jed Johnson, Tom Aniello.

With the news that he had won the chance to fly a PC-12 NG for up to eight flight hours, Bilson set about planning a trip that would take advantage of the airplane's 260-knot true airspeed, huge load-hauling capabilities, and short-field performance. When we arrived, he was set for his first leg from his base at Camarillo to the "Airport in the Sky" on Catalina Island, 20 miles off the California coast. At only 3,000 feet long, the runway would be a challenge for many turboprops based on length alone, but Catalina is particularly tricky because it sits on a bluff battered by winds and with a hump in the middle. You can't see the far end of the runway when on short final, so pilots frequently perceive they are running out of runway upon touchdown—resulting in blown tires and bolted approaches. With its trailing-link landing gear, the PC-12 NG handles the short runway with aplomb, even with seven on board—including Bilson's wife, Jeanne, and daughter Brooke on their first introduction to corporate flying.

Our first stop is to meet the owner of a beach club on the island looking to reduce its use of fresh water for landscape irrigation. Bilson has been in the irrigation and water conservation business for more than 25 years. ReWater Systems has several patents on nozzles and other gear to use greywater for irrigation, reducing the need for fresh water and also reducing the amount of wastewater going into sewer systems, a plus on both ends. Greywater is any water used in a home other than that from the kitchen sink or toilets. Water from showers, washing machines, and other sinks is collected and filtered for irrigation use. ReWater Systems' valves and computer controls allow the use of fresh water if, during a 24-hour period, not enough greywater is available. Meanwhile, if too much greywater is collected, the excess is dumped into the sewer system, as it would be otherwise.

Water conservation is especially important in the drought-stricken West, and ReWater Systems' technology has



earned the attention of several large residential builders, water districts, and city councils. Until recently, Bilson's primary customers have been custom builders of large homes only. With an airplane like the PC-12, he has the ability to broaden his customer base and connect with more builders.

On Catalina Island, all fresh water is desalinated, making it especially expensive and driving up the demand for water recycling. Upon arrival at the beach club, Bilson immediately notices the drought-distressed landscape plants. "They have a lot invested here and it's not looking good," he says. But in a case of best-laid plans, the meeting with the club owner doesn't happen, because he is delayed at another property on the other side of the island. Our schedule doesn't allow time for us to connect with him, but at least Bilson now knows the lay of the land at the club.

The PC-12 NG makes quick work of the return to Camarillo, this time with Bilson in the left seat getting his

Having won the contest, Bilson set out planning a trip that would take advantage of the PC-12 NG's capabilities.

first taste of high-performance flying. A longtime pilot, he owns a Yak 52, which he frequently uses for aerobatics. Upon occasion over the years he has rented single-engine Cessnas for trips to visit customers in California, but their payload and space limitations prohibit him from taking along the gear and equipment he frequently needs to show builders.

The next morning we're up early and driving to a construction site to see an installation in progress. As it turns out, the home under construction is owned by AOPA member Scott Barer, who is building on a hill overlooking Camarillo with a commanding view of the airport where he keeps his Cessna 182. Upon their first meeting at

the construction site, Barer and Bilson discovered they were both pilots based at Camarillo. "I'm really, really impressed by the system," Barer said. "Steve really knows his stuff. I'm a realist. We live in a state with a serious water problem. Greywater from one house isn't going to cure it, but you have to start somewhere."

As we wind our way back down the hill toward the airport in Bilson's pickup, the entrepreneur explains how he has been involved in four different legislative efforts in Sacramento to change state laws to make it easier to install greywater systems. Each of the four bills required some 50 trips to Sacramento, causing Bilson to lament not having an airplane like the





STEVE BILSON soaks up PC-12 NG systems knowledge from Chief Pilot Jed Johnson (above). Thanks to the turboprop's efficiency, Bilson is able to make his pitch to a San Diego developer just a couple of hours after leaving home in Camarillo (center), 140 nm away and over Southern California morning rush traffic. The PC-12 NG flew altitudes as high as 27,000 feet and legs as short as 37 nm (right).

PC-12 NG available. "Everyone in the West is dependent on the Colorado River, and it's drier than it's ever been. We increase the availability of water [for irrigation] by 30 percent." Reductions in the cost of fresh water and reducing the output of wastewater all help the homeowner to recoup the cost of the greywater system over time.

With a ReWater Systems holding tank and filter loaded through the PC-12 NG's giant cargo door, we're set for the next leg of Bilson's adventure: a whole 15 minutes to

the city. This is Bilson's big chance to move from supplying custom home builders with individual systems to selling them in quantity to a large builder.

Once again bypassing the Southern California ground traffic, we soon touch down at Montgomery Field, where we are met by one of Bilson's sales reps and a technical consultant for his business. They offload the tank and filtration system to show to another customer while Bilson preps for his meeting with the developer.

"We have people that need to go here, there, everywhere all the time. Southwest Airlines is the option if you're going to put people all over, but that's not very efficient timewise."

Burbank to pick up his marketing consultant. Such a flight in a business jet would be a workload-intensive affair, but because the turboprop easily adapts to low-altitude flights and slower speeds down low, Bilson handles it with assurance under Johnson's guidance. It's almost joyful to see the Los Angeles morning rush hour traffic backed up everywhere as we efficiently motor overhead.

With the quick pickup of Roger Bent, we're off to San Diego for Steve's most important meeting of the whole experience. For months he's been trying to get in front of a San Diego developer who is building an 1,800-home complex outside

Ninety minutes later we emerge from the meeting, with Bilson certain he's made progress with the developer. His PowerPoint presentation and convincing facts about water usage and costs demonstrated for the developer how greywater systems will be welcomed by the individual home buyers. "I think we're going to get some big orders from him. Hey, I may be a customer for a PC-12 next year!" he declares.

Bilson uses the evening in San Diego to strategize with Bent about a major marketing push they are about to launch to potential customers who have applied for new-home building permits.



Early the next morning we sprint over the traffic again, arriving in Burbank to drop off Bent just 45 minutes after leaving Montgomery Field—a trip that, by car, would take about four hours in traffic.

Then it's on to Sacramento for a meeting with a state senator involved with legislation regarding irrigation. With a climb to the flight levels, Bilson gets to see the PC-12 NG strut its stuff a bit as he diverts around some light showers and has to deal with icing. He's impressed by how quickly the boots shed the ice and with all the ways that the PC-12 NG's Honeywell Apex flight deck integrates weather information. "There's redundancy on top of redundancy," he says.

Sacramento International soon appears on the moving maps across the sophisticated flight deck, and we're headed toward the runway. Sacramento Jet Center pulls our rental car up to the airplane, and Bilson climbs in for the quick drive to the capitol. There it's clear he's a regular as he expertly maneuvers through security and up to the Senate level, where he weaves his way through the maze of hallways to the office of State Sen. Tom Berryhill, who represents the San Joaquin Valley agricultural region. "Farmers compete with cities for water. The fight goes on forever. It never ends," laments Bilson. Berryhill has become an ally for Bilson because ReWater Systems helps city dwellers use water more responsibly, which farmers appreciate.

Assured of Berryhill's support in enacting new federal guidelines at the state level



for water projects, Bilson declares the day a success. We dash back to Camarillo, covering the 300 nautical miles in less than 90 minutes—arriving in time for him to have an early dinner with his family.

Reflecting on his experience, Bilson is amazed at what a business airplane can do for his company. "We're always going places. We're always in Sacramento. California is a long state. We have builders all over the state and soon, all over the West. We have people that need to go here, there, everywhere all the time. Southwest Airlines is the option if you're going to put people all over, but that's not very efficient timewise."

Indeed, trying to replicate the trips we conducted in two days would have taken many more days and hours of delay, and a jumble of logistics—and there is no scheduled airline service to Catalina.

Of course, as a pilot, for Bilson it's not all just business. Piloting an airplane as capable as a PC-12 NG brings its own challenges and pleasures. It seems he's hooked. "I want to keep that plane," he says with a laugh. "I don't want to give it back."

AOPA

+ INFO

FOR MORE INFORMATION
on how an airplane might be useful in your business, search "business use of airplane" on AOPA.org or visit the No Plane, No Gain website (<http://noplanenogain.org/>).

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