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## Hijacker may have wanted to buy plane

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© St. Petersburg Times, published September 25, 2001

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Employees told the man that the department does not offer such loans, and referred him to a local private lender, according to a bank president whose security chief was briefed by the FBI. It appears the man did visit that lender and made further inquiries about a crop-duster loan, but there is no record that he applied for one, according to Robert Epling, president of Community Bank of Florida.

The suspected hijacker's apparent interest in the spray planes has heightened fears that the United States may be at risk of an aerial assault involving biological or chemical weapons. The loan inquiry revelation comes one day after employees at a Florida municipal airport said the suspected hijacker, Mohamed Atta, and several other Middle Eastern men repeatedly visited the airport to learn more about crop-dusters.

The Federal Aviation Administration has grounded the nation's crop-duster fleet three times for several days at a time since the attacks on New York and Washington two weeks ago.

Experts Monday offered differing assessments about how one might use a plane to release a deadly cloud of microbes over an unsuspecting populace. But choosing to err on the side of caution, FBI agents and other law enforcement officials fanned out across the country last week and over the weekend, warning agricultural aviators to keep a close eye on their equipment and report suspicious behavior immediately.

Those suspicions were based in part on the discovery last week that Atta and several colleagues made repeated visits to Belle Glade State Municipal Airport, starting in February of this year. There, they peppered agricultural aviators with questions about fuel and chemical capacities and asked how difficult it was to fly the planes.

Until Monday, however, no evidence had been made public to suggest that Atta had looked into acquiring a plane.

Epling said Monday that his bank, headquartered in Homestead, received a call from the FBI seven to 10 days ago saying that Atta had gone into a USDA office that until recently was in the bank's building. The agents asked if Atta had applied for such a loan from Community Bank, since USDA employees had apparently suggested to Atta that he try Epling's bank. Several USDA employees had recently identified Atta to the FBI, and recalled that he wore Tommy Hilfiger clothes and a lot of cologne, according to the FBI version of events provided to the bank.

Crop-dusters can be bought for as little as \$80,000 to \$100,000, said James Callan, executive director of the National Agricultural Aviation Association. No special security checks are conducted on pilots who apply for agricultural aviation licenses, according to the FAA.

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