



The Four Winds

National Weather Service Employees Organization

September 2006

Editorial: Safety Problems associated with single person coverage on shifts

It is a tragedy to hear the news reports of the plane that took off from the wrong runway in Lexington, Kentucky. Even more distressing are recent reports showing that this disaster could have been prevented had the FAA staffed the tower in Lexington with two controllers instead of one. It is an example of a government agency's trying to save money and in doing so costing 49 people their lives; of an agency that put efficiency over effectiveness.

Unfortunately, the parallels between the FAA and the NWS are just too great not to point out. Both agencies have, as part of their mission, the obligation to save lives and property. The NWS, too, for the sake of efficiency, is exploring new ways to reduce staff by cutting down to one person, or in some cases even closing some offices at night. In at least one office in the Western Region, they are testing *single-person* shift coverage right now – *just like at the Lexington Tower*. In addition, plans continue to be discussed that would consolidate aviation forecasting into just a few regional centers. These aviation forecasting centers would not only lose the face-to-face contact that we now have with Air Traffic Controllers, but they would take away the weather forecasting offices' ability to add local knowledge to our nation's aviation forecasts.

By developing a Concept of Operations that includes less than 24/7 operations, with less than at least two forecasters on duty at all times, and in less than 124 locations (the NWSEO believes that some large cities that do not currently have a local forecasting office, like Baltimore and Charlotte, should have one), the leadership of the NWS is risking the lives of the American Public. The NWS says it is doing this because roughly two-thirds of the NWS budget goes to labor, and that is unsustainable. The NWSEO believes that is not a good reason to put people's lives in jeopardy. In fact, in the recent past a Congressman asked a top level manager of the NWS, under oath, if the NWS needed more money to fund its operations, and that manager unequivocally said "No."

What happened in Kentucky the other day was terrible. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families of the people who were on that plane, and to the controller who will have to live with the results of his actions for the rest of his life. NWSEO, however, has no sympathy for the FAA management that put the controller in that situation. This preventable tragedy is on their hands. It is their bureaucratic short-sightedness in looking only at efficiency, and ignoring effectiveness, that at least partially caused this accident. We applaud those in Congress who are calling for an inquiry into why the tower was only staffed with one controller at night. We can only hope that the management of the NWS will learn from this, and stop making the same foolish decisions that are taking us down the road of the FAA and FEMA, and that could some day cost someone's life.