

Commerce Secretary Approves Plan to Close Weather Offices at Air Traffic Control Centers: Move Will Endanger Traffic Safety, Forecasters Union Says

WASHINGTON D.C. (June 4, 2009) – The Department of Commerce announced today that it is moving forward with controversial plans to close the National Weather Service Center Weather Service Units (“CWSUs”) located at each of the 20 Air Route Traffic Control Centers (ARTCC) in the continental United States. These forecast units provide real time, face-to-face, weather guidance to the air traffic controllers and air traffic management supervisors. The NWS has offered to send the FAA forecasts from two central units located in Maryland and Kansas City instead. The proposal was developed by the NWS in response to an FAA request to cut the cost of the CWSU program, which is funded from the FAA budget.

“If DOC’s plan is implemented, air traffic controllers will no longer have the immediate expertise of an on-site meteorologist to advise them where to route aircraft experiencing difficulty when weather conditions play a critical role in that decision,” said Dan Sobien, President of the National Weather Service Employees Organization. NWS forecasters at the ARTCCs routinely provide emergency assistance to aircraft that have lost instrumentation during bad weather, Sobien noted.

Under the plan approved by Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, who oversees the NWS, only the “lead forecaster on duty” will be available at each of the two consolidated CWSUs nationwide as a point-of-contact to support to ten ARTCCs at a time. He or she will provide emergency support by instant messaging or telephone rather than face-to-face, and may be unavailable due to competing demands from other ARTCCs. Currently, each ARTCC has a dedicated forecaster on duty on-site.

New York Senior Senator Charles Schumer is outspoken about how the consolidation would affect flight safety at New York’s airports. As posted on his web site, Senator Schumer said, “Our airspace and airports are the most complex and congested in the world and to move the local experts away is simply penny wise and pound foolish. The bottom line is the FAA’s consolidation plans could compromise air travel safety and reduce the efficiency of travel in New York City and we simply cannot allow that to happen.”

The Commerce Department’s consolidation plans ignore the findings of a January 27, 2006 study of the CWSUs conducted for the FAA by Booz-Allen. The report concluded that all seven ARTCCs that participated in the study desired to retain an on-site CWSU and face-to-face interaction with meteorologists rather than rely on remote briefings.

On April 18, 2007 Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Inouye wrote the FAA Administrator a letter opposing consolidation plans because the Committee “has grave concerns over the safety and wisdom of removing meteorologists from the ARTCCs.” Senator Inouye wrote that “the Committee believes that the FAA should focus its efforts on working with the NWS to enhance the services provided by its meteorologists in situ,

rather than considering proposals to obtain meteorological support for the ARTCCS from off-site.”

More information about the FAA’s plans to consolidate CWSU can be found at www.nwseo.org

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