

Testimony by
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National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA)
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Subcommittee on Aviation
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Thank you Chairman Costello and Ranking Member Petri for allowing me to appear before you today. My name is Patricia Gilbert and I have been an air traffic controller at Houston Air Traffic Control Center for just over 19 years. While a full time air traffic controller, I serve as NATCA's Chairperson to the National Legislative Committee.

I would like to begin by expressing our appreciation for your interest in the conditions of FAA facilities around the country. The condition of the FAA's Air Traffic Facilities are of great concern to NATCA and its' members, especially in light of recent incidents that have jeopardized the employees' ability to perform their jobs safely.

For example, unacceptable worker conditions came to light when controllers became ill after noxious fumes entered work areas at a number of FAA facilities. Mr. Forrey touched on how the controllers at the New York TRACON and Washington Dulles Tower were recently taken ill when

suddenly exposed to carbon monoxide. Other employees at facilities in Jacksonville, Fla., San Jose, Calif., and Eugene, Ore. have faced a similar scenario when unidentified “fumes” entered their work areas as well. In each of these instances, the employees felt the Agency response did not correspond with their concerns.

SURVEY

The FAA has never, to our knowledge, compiled an overall list of environmental, equipment, health, or safety issues from its 314 air traffic field facilities. Based on this lack of available data and the overwhelming volume of specific complaints from individual facilities, NATCA decided earlier this year to request individual facility reports from its field representatives for compiling into a national database.

The survey gathered reports from Air Traffic Control Towers, Enroute Traffic Control Centers and Terminal Radar Approach Control or (TRACONs). When reviewing the results of our survey, we looked for any issues that potentially presented a safety concern. While information for some facilities was not received, over 220 facilities provided data in varying detail. This nationwide field survey identified a wide variety of problems and needs. In reviewing the research, we looked for trends as opposed to

individual and routine maintenance issues. In this regard, the most commonly reported problems were mold and other harmful contaminants, external leaks, and building ventilation and temperature control.

TRENDS REPORTED

The FAA's disregard of facility maintenance has resulted in harmful contaminants in many of its facilities. Exposure to these dangerous contaminants has resulted in unsafe worker conditions at facilities across the nation.

- In the Detroit Air Traffic Control Tower two years ago, black toxic mold (*Stachybotrys*), as well as several other toxic mold types were found.
- The Chicago-O'Hare Air Traffic Control Tower had fire suppression pipes break and flood various parts of the facility in February and initial NATCA test results show possible mold.
- Kansas City Tower recently identified mold in various rooms and contaminated insulation was found below the raised flooring, which is located directly in front of the air discharge.

- It is my understanding that the FAA's approach to mold remediation is exactly the reverse of accepted practice. Their current intent is to remove and/or treat the mold first, and then, only at a later date, address the causes of the mold.
- Grand Rapids has had several environmental issues during the last ten years relating to bacteria contamination, water leaks and possible mold contamination.

The survey also revealed that air traffic control towers and radar rooms across the nation have serious external leaks. Many of these leaks are into equipment rooms and jeopardize expensive and vital safety equipment.

- The Chicago Center, located in Aurora, Ill., had major water leaks over the back wall of the building (2004) and in the basement. The extent of possible mold contamination is unknown at this point.

Our research has found that in nearly every facility surveyed, the operators and occupants reported poor heating, air conditioning, and air quality.

In several air traffic control towers, the poor environmental conditions represent a potentially serious situation, not just to the employees, but also to the flying public. A notable example is the recurrence of condensation

accumulating on the windowpanes of tower cabs in San Juan and South Florida, causing reduced visibility, which in some cases can be extreme and unsafe.

The picture on the monitor shows that due to the condensation on the San Juan tower cab windows, air traffic controllers are sometimes 'blind' without the ability to scan the runways or taxiways. In the picture, you can barely make out the Airbus crossing just in front of the tower..

STATISTICS OF SURVEY

The following are some quick facts and statistics about the survey:

- Nearly 100 percent of the facilities responding reported declining environmental, equipment, safety and/or health issues.
- Most facilities reported the overall condition of their facilities as merely fair, with 62 reporting their conditions as poor, and an additional 18 reporting their condition as dangerous.
- 40 facilities report significant mold issues; many are dealing with toxic (black) mold and its associated health risks, with the most extreme cases reporting employees already suffering long term or permanent injuries from exposure.

- Asbestos in buildings, other abatement issues, and dangerous releases are still a serious concern at over 30 facilities. New York Center, Atlanta Center, and Fargo, S.D. Tower, among others, are still awaiting years long promised asbestos abatement.
- 75 facilities report water leaks, of which at least a half a dozen reported frequent leaks directly on controllers or equipment.
- Adding to this are serious issues at many facilities with fumes leaking into the working areas from jet fuel, jet exhaust, insecticides, solvents (toluene) and generator/other engine exhausts. Several facilities report employees still unable to return to work due to exposure side effects.
- Over 100 facilities report significant issues with heating and cooling, resulting in extreme seasonal temperature variations and inconsistent temperatures from area to area. Even brand new facilities, such as Addison Tower in Dallas, Texas, which was commissioned in 2006, report temperature variations with lows in the 50's and highs over 100 degrees in the operating quarters, resulting in obvious human discomfort as well as equipment risk.
 - Of these facilities, over 50 report chronic air quality issues including cold and flu-like symptoms, respiratory/breathing

problems, headaches, and controllers routinely sickened from lack of ventilation.

- Northern California TRACON has a recurring issue with snakes in the building during the summer and fall months, while St. Louis Tower deals with the challenge of bats. Both are relatively new facilities. 28 other facilities report pervasive infestation issues with rats, mice, wasps, termites, ants, and flies.
- Other issues of concern at numerous facilities include poorly placed equipment obstructing the operation or obscuring visibility, windows in tower cabs routinely fogging up on the inside, lead heavy or malodorous or contaminated drinking water, excessive dust or other surface contaminants amongst others.

We believe that it is clear the FAA must be held accountable to make better maintenance investments in ATC facilities. These are taxpayer-financed facilities and the taxpayers' investment must be protected.

THANK You Mr. Chairman