U.S. Department of Transportation
Office of the Secretary of Transportation

The Inspector General

Office of Inspector General
Washington, DC 20590

May 10, 2007

The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Chairman, Committee on Transportation
and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This is in response to a request from your staff that we conduct a follow-up review to our audit of staffing at the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) combined radar approach control and tower with radar facilities. We conducted that audit in response to your August 30, 2006, letter requesting that we review FAA policies reportedly prohibiting one controller from performing both radar and tower controller duties at these facilities. You also requested that we determine the extent to which towers covered by the policy were complying with it. We issued the results of that audit on March 16, 2007.[1]

Based on our findings, your staff requested that we perform additional follow-up work to determine if these FAA facilities are complying with FAA's new, written policy for staffing on midnight shifts.[2] The enclosure to this letter details the results of our follow-up review.

Overall, we found that facilities are complying with FAA's new policy. Our sample of 45 days of staffing data at each of the 15 statistically selected locations found that at least 2 controllers were scheduled on all midnight shifts at those locations and that controllers were not combining positions for extended periods of time. In addition, we found that FAA is taking actions to address the recommendation from our March 2007 report to develop and implement appropriate procedures to ensure that facilities are complying with the new policy.

[1] OIG Report Number AV-2007-038, "Review of Staffing at FAA's Radar Approach Control and Tower With Radar Facilities," March 16, 2007. OIG reports can be found on our website: www.oig.dot.gov.

[2] The new, written policy; FAA Notice N JO 7210.639, "Consolidating Control Functions"; was issued on November 17, 2007.

For example, FAA is adding midnight shift staffing as a specific review item to its facility evaluation process, which is conducted by an FAA Headquarters quality assurance group at all FAA air traffic facilities every 3 years.

Based on our results and FAA's ongoing actions, we are not making any further recommendations regarding staffing at combined approach control and tower with radar facilities at this time.

We have provided a similar response to Jerry F. Costello, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Aviation.

If I can answer any questions or be of further assistance in this matter, please contact me at (202) 366-1959 or my Deputy, Todd J. Zinser, at (202) 366-6767.

Sincerely,

Calvin L. Scovel III
Inspector General

Enclosure

cc: FAA Administrator
FAA Deputy Administrator
Vice President of Terminal Services, Air Traffic Organization

BACKGROUND

On the morning of August 27, 2006, Comair flight 5191 was scheduled to fly from Lexington, Kentucky, to Atlanta, Georgia. Based on preliminary reports, the pilots mistakenly taxied onto the wrong runway at Lexington and executed their take-off roll. The runway, however, was too short to complete a take-off, and a tragic accident occurred that resulted in the loss of 49 passengers and crew.

Shortly after the accident, media reports surfaced indicating that only one air traffic controller was working in the Lexington tower at the time of the accident. According to those reports, the controller was working both tower and radar functions combined and reportedly had his back turned to the airfield during Comair 5191's take-off roll. The media also reported that this was contrary to FAA policy, which reportedly required that two controllers be present in towers that provide both tower control and radar services.

As a result of those reports, on August 30, 2006, Representative James Oberstar, then Ranking Democratic Member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and Representative Jerry Costello, then Ranking Democratic Member of the House Subcommittee on Aviation, requested that the Office of Inspector General review the FAA policy that reportedly prohibited one controller from performing both radar and tower controller duties and determine the extent to which the towers covered by the policy were complying with it.

We briefed the Congressmen's staff on December 20, 2006, concerning the results of our review. Based on discussions at that briefing, we agreed to perform additional follow-up work.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this review was to determine the extent to which FAA combined radar approach control and tower with radar facilities are complying with provisions of FAA Notice N JO 7210.639, "Consolidating Control Functions."

CRITERIA

FAA Notice N JO 7210.639—which was effective November 17, 2006—states the following:

> At facilities where both tower and radar/nonradar approach control services are provided, the air traffic manager must ensure, to the maximum extent possible, that these functions are not consolidated unless unforeseen circumstances or emergency situations arise. . . .
>
> During midwatch operations (between 2230 and 0630 local time), when traffic is very light, all functions may be consolidated for short meal or physiological breaks.[1] At facilities with a tower only operation and staffing of only one certified professional controller (CPC), coordination must be accomplished with the facility providing radar/non-radar approach control services to the airport before the CPC can leave the operational quarters for physiological breaks. This should only be done during periods of light to zero traffic.

METHODOLOGY

As of January 2006, there were 138 combined radar approach control and tower with radar facilities in the National Airspace System. Seventy-three of these facilities operated 24 hours per day. We limited our review to 62 of the 73 facilities that were designated as Air Traffic Control Level 5 through 9.[2] These 62 facilities are closest in complexity to the Lexington, Kentucky, facility (a Level 7 facility).

To determine if the facilities were complying with FAA's new policy, we statistically selected and reviewed 15 of the 62 facilities in our universe (see table below). We performed site visits at 4 of the 15 facilities. During these visits, we requested and reviewed staffing data for all midnight shifts for the period of November 17, 2006, through December 31, 2006 (45 days). We also reviewed the same 45 days of staffing data for all midnight shifts for the 11 facilities that we did not visit; FAA Headquarters provided us with those data.

[1] Although FAA's written policy does not define a "short" meal or physiological break, we considered position combinations of greater than 60 minutes to be an exception to the policy for the purposes of our review.

[2] FAA air traffic facilities are categorized into multiple levels (5 through 12); the higher the level, the greater the demand on a controller's judgment, skill, and decision-making ability.

Table. Sample of 15 Facilities Reviewed

Facility ID	Facility Name	City	State	ATC Level
TOL	Toledo Express Airport	Toledo	Ohio	7
SHV	Shreveport Regional Airport	Shreveport	Louisiana	7
FAY*	Fayetteville Regional Airport	Fayetteville	North Carolina	7
DSM	Des Moines International Airport	Des Moines	Iowa	7
FAT	Fresno-Yosemite Airport	Fresno	California	8
TYS*	McGhee Tyson Airport	Knoxville	Tennessee	8
BOI	Boise Air Terminal	Boise	Idaho	8
ACY*	Atlantic City International Airport	Atlantic City	New Jersey	8
RDU	Raleigh-Durham International Airport	Raleigh/Durham	North Carolina	9
AUS	Austin-Bergstrom International Airport	Austin	Texas	9
SDF	Louisville International Airport	Louisville	Kentucky	9
IND	Indianapolis International Airport	Indianapolis	Indiana	9
MCI	Kansas City International Airport	Kansas City	Missouri	9
LIT*	Little Rock International Airport	Little Rock	Arkansas	9
TUL	Tulsa International Airport	Tulsa	Oklahoma	9

* OIG staff visited the Fayetteville, Knoxville, Atlantic City, and Little Rock facilities.
Source: Office of Inspector General

We also obtained and reviewed position logs from all 15 facilities for all midnight shifts for the same period. The position logs indicate which tower and radar positions are open during a shift and who is actually working those positions. At the four facilities we visited, we also interviewed facility managers to determine staffing levels and traffic counts on the midnight shifts and obtain their views on implementation of the new policy. We also interviewed union representatives at each of the four facilities to obtain their view on how the new policy had affected staffing at the facility.

RESULTS

We found that FAA's combined radar approach control and tower with radar facilities are complying with provisions of FAA Notice N JO 7210.639, "Consolidating Control Functions." Although, we did find exceptions to the policy at three facilities, the exceptions were minor. For example, in one instance, all positions were combined, and one controller was working alone for 62 minutes rather than the 60-minute time limit we used for our review. We consider those incidents immaterial to our overall findings and concluded that the facilities are complying with FAA's new policy.

Based on the results at the 15 facilities in our sample, we can statistically project (with a 95-percent confidence level) that the percentage of non-compliance is between 0 and 20 percent, with a best estimate that all 62 combined radar approach control and tower with radar facilities in our universe were complying with the policy.

In addition, we found that FAA is taking actions to address the recommendation from our March 2007 report to develop and implement appropriate procedures to ensure that facilities are complying with the new, written policy. For example, FAA is adding midnight shift staffing as a specific review item to its facility evaluation process, which is conducted by a quality assurance group from FAA Headquarters at all FAA air traffic facilities every 3 years.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of our review and FAA's ongoing actions to address the recommendations from our March 16, 2007, report, we are not making any further recommendations regarding staffing at combined approach control and tower with radar facilities at this time.