



U.S. Department  
of Transportation

**Federal Aviation  
Administration**

Office of Airport Planning and Programming

November 30, 2000

\*See attached list of addressees  
Top 100 Airports

Dear Airport Official:

The purpose of this letter is to clarify for you that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) environmentally reviews all proposed airport development projects submitted for airport layout plan approval and for funding. This is a federal requirement that has been in place for years under the National Environmental Policy Act, but may not be clearly understood by all airport officials.

In an August 2000 report on Aviation and the Environment, Airport Operations and Future Growth Present Environmental Challenges, the General Accounting Office (GAO) identified a misunderstanding by some airport officials regarding environmental reviews of proposed airport development. A number of airport officials at the 50 busiest commercial service airports responded to a GAO survey that at least some of the projects at their airports did not require FAA environmental review. The FAA subsequently confirmed with the GAO that environmental reviews were indeed required and performed.

This apparent misunderstanding relates to projects that are categorically excluded from more detailed environmental review. While environmental impact statements (EIS) and environmental assessments/findings of no significant impact (EA/FONSI) are highly visible documents, categorical exclusion determinations often pass unnoticed by airport officials because usually no written environmental document is prepared. The FAA internally integrates such determinations with planning review and funding processes. The GAO recommended that the FAA clarify for airport officials that all airport expansion projects are subject to environmental review and that the FAA more systematically document categorical exclusion determinations and communicate the results of all environmental reviews to airport officials.

The FAA's environmental requirements governing airport development projects are in FAA Order 5050.4A, Airport Environmental Handbook. The FAA performs an environmental review of projects submitted for airport layout plan (ALP) approval on either new or revised ALPs, whether or not federal funding is requested. Likewise, projects submitted for funding under the grant-in-aid program or for the use of passenger facility charges are environmentally reviewed. The FAA applies the guidance in the order to determine whether each project is categorically excluded from further review, or requires an EIS or EA/FONSI.

Many categories of projects have no potential significant impact on the environment and are categorically excluded. With respect to ALP approval, the FAA's unconditional approval of an ALP signifies that the FAA has completed the environmental review of all projects on the ALP.

When certain proposed projects on an ALP require either an EA or EIS, the FAA may conditionally approve the ALP. The FAA's conditional ALP approval is accompanied by a statement that specific projects require further environmental review and approval by the FAA before they may be undertaken. Neither the unconditional approval nor the conditional approval has included notification to airport officials of the projects that were environmentally reviewed and categorically excluded. When funding is involved, categorical exclusion determinations are documented in FAA's Airport Improvement Program and Passenger Facility Charge records, but have not necessarily been communicated back to airport officials.

We intend to more systematically document and inform airport officials of FAA's categorical exclusion determinations, in addition to EIS and FONSI approvals. This will not change FAA's environmental requirements or the way that environmental reviews are performed; it will simply provide a better record of reviews. We trust that this will provide a clearer indication to airport sponsors that environmental reviews have been performed and will eliminate further misunderstanding.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact your nearest FAA regional Airports Division or Airports District Office for assistance.

Sincerely,

***original signed by***

Lynne S. Pickard  
Manager, Community and Environmental Needs Division