



U.S. Office of Special Counsel  
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## **DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION SUBSTANTIATES WHISTLEBLOWER'S SAFETY CONCERNS AT DETROIT METROPOLITAN AIRPORT**

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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WASHINGTON, DC/March 11, 2010 – Today, the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) transmitted to the President and Congress the Department of Transportation's (DOT) response to whistleblower allegations that Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) managers at Detroit Metropolitan Airport (DTW) compromised the safety of the flying public by operating an air traffic approach and departure configuration known as the "Southwest Flow" in an unsafe manner and in violation of FAA policy, and that FAA officials provided disingenuous information in response to a Congressional request.

The whistleblower, Air Traffic Controller Vincent Sugent, also disclosed that management guidance to controllers for directing traffic on an airport taxiway was contradictory and unclear, and that procedures for segregating jet and propeller aircraft departures were unsafe.

The June 2009 report and supplemental reports from DOT to OSC found that for a period of approximately six months, a critical segment of DTW's "Southwest Flow" operation was often non-compliant with FAA Order 7110.65, which prescribes aircraft separation standards for intersecting runways, thus allowing a potentially unsafe condition to persist, in part as a result of DTW management's failure to provide controllers with proper instruction on its safe operation. The report also determined that for two months during the same time period as referenced above, a DTW Operations Manager knowingly allowed the non-compliant operation to occur.

The report also substantiated that DTW managers provided wording for FAA's September 2007 response to an inquiry from Senator Carl Levin about the Southwest Flow that was, at a minimum, disingenuous. FAA sent a clarifying letter to Senator Levin in April 2008, only after OSC referred Mr. Sugent's concerns for investigation. The report also found that the "hold short" lines on Taxiway Quebec, and as depicted on controller monitor screens, were insufficient for controllers to comply with DTW guidance for directing traffic on this taxiway. In addition, DTW's guidance and Operating Manual contain contradictory language, which creates confusion for controllers. Finally, the report found that DTW management had not implemented necessary changes to written guidance provided to controllers for segregating jet and propeller aircraft departures.

FAA pledged to take appropriate corrective and administrative action in response to the findings of the report. DTW has ceased operation of the Southwest Flow, the DTW managers have been counseled, and changes have been made to FAA and DTW guidance concerning Taxiway Quebec and jet and propeller departures. An audit of the corrective actions was completed by FAA's Air Traffic Safety Oversight Services in November 2009 and a report is expected soon.

OSC determined that the agency's reports contain all the information required by statute and the findings appear reasonable.

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*The U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) is an independent investigative and prosecutorial agency and operates as a secure channel for disclosures of whistleblower complaints. Its primary mission is to safeguard the merit system in federal employment by protecting federal employees and applicants from prohibited personnel practices, especially retaliation for whistleblowing. OSC has also jurisdiction over the Hatch Act. For more information, please visit our web site at [www.osc.gov](http://www.osc.gov) or call 1 (800) 872-9855.*