
Please find below and attached a letter from National Air Traffic Controllers Association President Patrick Forrey to FAA Administrator Marion Blakey on the subject of employee safety in the wake of three major incidents in recent weeks and months at air traffic control facilities in which poor FAA management response and inaction contributed to serious injuries to controllers due to harmful exposure to chemicals, fumes and carbon monoxide.

-Doug Church
Director of Communications
National Air Traffic Controllers Association
202-220-9802

May 16, 2007

The Honorable Marion Blakey
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20591

Dear Administrator Blakey,

It is my sincere hope you can reassure me that the Agency continues to make the safety and well-being of its employees a matter of extreme importance, especially considering that the safety of the flying public is in their hands every minute of every day. However, three recent incidents at major facilities on the East Coast involving botched maintenance projects and appallingly poor – even negligent – management decisions severely sickened over a dozen of your employees and has led me to question the commitment of the Agency to provide even the most basic of needs for its employees; fresh air, first aid and time to recover from injury free from harassment and intimidation.

On Feb. 28, a botched roofing project and failed cleanup efforts at Jacksonville TRACON resulted in employees having to breath toxic odors. Controllers began to suffer from various side effects: Dizziness, nausea, tingling skin, and chest pains. Local FAA management was approached repeatedly about this issue, but they refused to acknowledge that the harmful vapors existed in the TRACON part of the facility. By the 10th day of the ordeal, controllers were beginning to suffer the effects of being exposed to these dangerous chemicals for a long period of time. As of this writing, 82 days after the incident, five controllers are still out of work and being treated by the Mayo Clinic. Making matters worse, the affected controllers were pressured to return to work, despite doctors' orders to stay away from the building; this after they were harassed at the facility, told to stop complaining and return to duty, and even denied the forms they needed to document their injuries. Adding insult to injury, we have heard reports that the facility manager has received an award for their handling of the matter. I would ask you to please investigate this report and, if it is true, understand why this is demeaning to a

workforce injured by management inaction.

On April 25, scheduled maintenance on an engine generator at the New York TRACON sent diesel exhaust fumes into the ventilation system for the building, resulting in a slow leak of deadly carbon monoxide gas. Six controllers in the Newark Area were affected and showed the familiar signs of carbon monoxide poisoning: Headache, nausea, extreme fatigue, loss of concentration and dizziness. But instead of receiving immediate attention from the facility's operations manager, Anthony Russo, and allowed to leave the building immediately for medical treatment and fresh air, Russo forced them to remain on the job and in the room. Even worse, he refused the controllers' request to call the fire department to test the air in the facility and tend to the injured employees. When controllers told Russo they would call the fire department themselves, Russo said he would not allow them onto the premises.

And on May 9, at Washington Dulles Air Traffic Control Tower, FAA management personnel delayed evacuating controllers and other tower employees for 45 minutes after noxious fumes from an airport construction project were absorbed and circulated by the tower's ventilation system, resulting in prolonged exposure to high levels of carbon monoxide that ended up sending five of your employees to the hospital.

Madam Administrator, these incidents, combined with the examples of toxic mold infestation that has sickened controllers in Detroit and another botched roofing project in San Jose that sent three employees out of work, among other safety-compromising events, constitute a very dangerous problem. Serious health damage has been done to employees, resulting in lost work, lost wages, lost productivity, lowered margin of safety due to the resulting staffing shortage and workman's compensation claims that should not have been necessary if responsible management was employed by the ATO.

We do not believe that asking for a safe working environment for employees tasked with ensuring aviation safety is an unreasonable request for an agency like the FAA that claims safety is its mission. Unfortunately, it has become painfully clear that the FAA would rather ignore and deny problems like unacceptably unsafe work environments than address them when they first appear.

I ask that you consider making this a matter of utmost importance. Your employees need to know that their workplaces won't make them sick and leave them with serious, life-threatening conditions and illnesses. Just as importantly, they need to know you care about their well-being and will instruct your management to provide immediate and complete assistance to their needs and a true commitment to ensuring their safe return to work.

Sincerely,

Patrick Forrey
NATCA President

