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FAA drops Mather night flight test

An alternative path over Cameron Park shifted the noise but didn't reduce it.

By Molly Dugan -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published May 30, 2004*)

The Federal Aviation Administration has decided not to resume a flight test for night landings at Mather Airport, saying the alternative path did not reduce noise for nearby communities.

The Sacramento County Airport System conducted the experiment from July to November last year in response to Folsom residents' complaints about noise, assistant director Rob Leonard said. The procedure shifted air traffic away from the city, sending flights to the south over Cameron Park, Shingle Springs and parts of El Dorado Hills.

After analyzing data from the test at the airfield near Rancho Cordova, officials said the airport system and the FAA determined this month that the alternative flight path did not reduce noise but simply moved it from one community to another.

"They took the logical approach," Shingle Springs resident John Kerhlikar said. "I don't think the other decision could have been defended."

During the test, pilots were asked to fly the alternative path between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. Slightly more than half of the pilots coming into Mather agreed, while the rest flew the other route, using a more precise instrument approach.

By the end of the test, the agencies received 1,224 noise complaints by phone and more than 200 by e-mail, most of them related to the test flight path, officials said.

"Here in Folsom, I don't think there was much of a change," resident Bill Bryant said. "I felt it was just as noisy."

Although the 120-day test initially won widespread support, the El Dorado County-City of Folsom Joint Powers Authority asked about halfway through that it be ended early. Residents complained about sleepless nights caused by noise from the air cargo planes.

After the test was completed, the FAA recommended that pilots fly the other path, which allows for the use of highly precise landing instruments. The alternative path provides some guidance to pilots but is not as precise.

"The FAA's primary concern is safety and efficiency," said Steven Alverson, a consultant with Environmental Science Associates. "After that, the issue of noise and noise abatement comes into play."

Ironically, the instrument system that guides air traffic on the preferred path will be down several months for an upgrade, starting in June. That means more nighttime air traffic will use the alternative path until the system is running again, likely in October, officials said.

Also, Mather is preparing for more nighttime air traffic from military planes, which will be landing there during runway construction at Travis Air Force Base.

As a long-term strategy to reduce noise, officials are studying a "continuous descent approach" that dictates how pilots operate the aircraft. The procedure reduces noise on the ground by managing throttle settings, flaps and landing-gear deployment.

Officials are working out the details of the continuous descent approach with air-cargo carrier UPS, which is expected to begin using it this year.

Meanwhile, environmental studies for the Mather Airport master plan are expected to begin in four to five months. The studies will look at noise issues.

About the Writer

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