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FAA plan hits turbulence in South Bay

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer

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For months, local aviators have been in an uproar over a proposed change to air traffic patterns around Long Beach Airport that could seriously affect where and how they fly, especially in the South Bay.

Many pilots in the region believe the Federal Aviation Administration's proposal - intended to reduce the risk of midair collisions between small aircraft and jetliners over densely populated areas - will instead put private aviators at risk.

And they say that local communities, particularly on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, could be faced with increased noise and pollution from small planes that will avoid a dramatically enlarged restricted area around Long Beach Airport.

"It's going to force the little airplanes to fly around the airspace and through Palos Verdes," said Pat Carey, owner of Beach Cities Aviation Academy at Hawthorne Municipal Airport.

Carey said most local pilots currently avoid the Palos Verdes Peninsula "because we respect

people's peace and quiet."

"The idea is to not cause noise problems. Now you're going to channel more people to fly over Palos Verdes whether they want to or not," Carey said.

The FAA proposal would more than triple the size of restricted airspace around Long Beach Airport and would require pilots entering the area to contact air traffic controllers in San Diego. The change was prompted by an increased number of alerts on anti-collision warning systems, FAA officials said.

Critics say general aviation traffic and particularly student pilots will go around the new airspace, seeking to avoid communicating with controllers. That will create an unintended consequence of diverting small aircraft into narrow corridors, compressing pilots into an area between Los Angeles International Airport and San Pedro.

In addition, the restricted airspace would overlap with a popular flight training area over the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors, rendering it "useless," according to some critics. The change would affect trainees coming out of Torrance, Hawthorne, Compton, Fullerton and Long Beach airports.

Despite the passionate response from local pilots, few outside of aviation circles have heard of the FAA plan, first announced in April and made public at two June meetings that were

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attended almost exclusively by aviators.

"They did not reach out to the surrounding communities," said Dennis McLean, finance director for Rancho Palos Verdes and a former airline official.

Now a handful of local cities, led by Rancho Palos Verdes and its recently hired aviation consultant, are expressing displeasure with the plan, joining local pilots.

"This really is a quiet community with minimal aircraft noise today. We believe the impact will be significant and noticeable to residents on a day-to-day basis," McLean said, stressing that the city was most concerned with safety.

The FAA plan would upgrade the current "Class D" airspace that extends in a 4.3-mile radius around Long Beach Airport to a much stricter "Class C" designation.

The new area would extend east from the Harbor (110) Freeway beyond the 605 Freeway, and down past the Harbor Area to Huntington Beach, with a northern border at the 91 Freeway.

Instead of contacting the airport's control tower, aviators would communicate with air traffic controllers in San Diego who handle that area's airport as well as LAX, John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana, and Burbank and Ontario.

The FAA does not intend to increase air traffic controller staffing, which further irritates critics

of the agency's plan.

"We deal with this all over the country. The current staffing is sufficient to handle this increase," said Lynn Lunsford, an FAA spokesman.

Lunsford said that of the 89 airports in the lower 48 states that handle more than 1 million passengers annually, Long Beach is the only facility that does not have a Class C designation or higher.

Jets flying out of Long Beach Airport - which handles a limit of 41 commercial flights daily - must climb through airspace that is "congested" with general aviation planes that rely on "visual flight rules," or VFR, Lunsford said.

"Smaller aircraft, VFR aircraft not talking to air traffic controllers, they tend to sort of gravitate toward this ... airspace because they don't have to talk to controllers," Lunsford said. "We have to provide separation. The goal is to reduce jets' exposure to untracked VFR traffic."

Carey - who is co-chairman of Southern California Airspace Users Working Group, which suggested an alternate solution to such problems - agreed that jets are challenged by smaller aircraft in their flight path.

But Carey said safety measures have improved conditions in recent years. The new proposal, he said, would not address the concerns of jet pilots.

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"It doesn't solve the problem. They have to do more work on the design," Carey said.

The proposal, which would also include changes to airspace at John Wayne Airport, follows a similar FAA effort that got further but was abandoned in 1991.

This time, JetBlue Airways has come in for particular criticism because it's believed that the airline's complaints about warning system alerts prompted the FAA proposal.

"The feeling is that JetBlue is bullying," said Don Stewart, a Rancho Palos Verdes pilot who alerted city officials to the FAA proposal.

A JetBlue spokeswoman noted that the airline has been working for seven years with the Southern California Airspace Users Working Group - a broad collection of commercial and private pilots, instructors, and officials from airlines and airports - on issues at Long Beach Airport.

"The FAA is the authority for this rule and can comment on the validity of the data. In order to protect the integrity of the process, JetBlue will not comment, but we are cooperating fully with the FAA," said Alison Croyle in an e-mailed statement.

Lunsford said he was not sure if there was any documentation to show a growing number of alerts.

"I know that we did notice an increase," Lunsford said, adding that the issue has been discussed for years.

An aviation consultant for Rancho Palos Verdes said he had not been able to find any evidence to explain why the FAA has pursued the change.

"The accident data doesn't support that there is an issue. There's no paper trail that I can find that supports why the FAA wants to do this," said Thomas Kamman, who worked for the federal agency for 30 years.

The California Pilots Association and the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association have stated opposition to the proposed change, saying a broader reconsideration of the Los Angeles area's extremely complex airspace is warranted, rather than a piecemeal approach.

Once a hotbed of the aerospace industry, the Los Angeles basin is dotted with small and large airports. In addition to contending with traffic from all of those sites, pilots have to consider geographic complications: the region's mountains and surrounding ocean.

The change to Long Beach airspace would further complicate things, local pilots say.

Aircraft seeking to avoid the Class C airspace would likely divert over South Bay neighborhoods, pilots say. Those planes waiting for permission to enter Long Beach airspace

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might circle at low altitude over surrounding areas, posing air safety and noise problems.

Certain commonly used routes would be severely compressed as well.

One of the most serious concerns is the overlap with a large flight training area over Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors. Students and teachers will not want to use an area where they will have to be in touch with air traffic controllers, pilots said.

"Instructors have enough going on on their hands. When they're trying to teach a student, there's a lot of conversation going on, so they will avoid that area," said Stewart, who keeps a small plane at Torrance airport.

Instead, instructors will crowd into a less popular training area over the southern part of the Palos Verdes Peninsula. That's a danger because inexperienced pilots will be compressed into a smaller area - and because The Hill offers far fewer places for an emergency landing than are available around the Harbor Area.

The par-five hole at Trump National Golf Club is probably the best option for an emergency landing, Stewart said.

Residents of the affluent area won't like the traffic, he said.

"The people on the coastline, from their perspective, they're more concerned with the

additional noise and exhaust," Stewart said.

McLean said South Bay residents should make their feelings known to the FAA by Sept. 21 - a deadline that was extended at the request of Rancho Palos Verdes.

The FAA disagrees with critics that its proposal would make conditions more dangerous for pilots, Lunsford said. Local residents' concerns, he said, are part of the reason the agency is seeking comment.

"That's obviously something we're taking into consideration," Lunsford said. "It's the FAA's position that this proposal would increase the safety margin for everybody while limiting the effect on private pilots."

Lunsford said if the FAA moves forward with its plan after the comment period, it will submit a public notice with more detail. It would take at least 18 months for the new regulations to be reviewed and put into effect, he said.

At city-owned Long Beach Airport, a spokeswoman said the change was strictly an FAA decision.

A longtime presence at the airport - Candy Robinson, owner of the Long Beach Flying Club - said the proposal would devastate the facility.

"I'd be out of business," said Robinson, who has run her flight school and charter company for 30 years.

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She said that when John Wayne Airport saw its airspace designation change about 20 years ago, it went from a vibrant general aviation facility to a site focused on airline traffic.

"It's all turned into this commercial airport now with G.A. being a subset," Robinson said. "I'd hate to see that happen to Long Beach. It's a G.A. airport that has airlines, not the other way around."

melissa.pamer@dailybreeze.com

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