

County of Santa Cruz

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BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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AGENDA: 6/23/15

June 16, 2015

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
County of Santa Cruz
701 Ocean Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

RE: FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION'S NEXTGEN PROGRAM

Dear Members of the Board:

On March 5, 2015, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) initiated new airliner flight paths over our county. These changes are a part of the larger NextGen Program of the FAA, with the goal to enhance the efficiency and safety of our commercial air traffic system. Jets that flew over a wide area are now concentrated over a very narrow route and in rapid succession. The new flight paths have dramatically affected the quality of life of our citizens, as evidenced by hundreds of complaints received by our offices. The purpose of this letter is to provide the Board with an understanding of these changes and impacts and to request that the Board support urging the FAA to modify the new flight paths to alleviate the negative impact on our community.

The Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) is a new national airspace system to be implemented in stages across the United States between 2012 and 2025. NextGen aims to transform America's air traffic control system from a ground-based system to a satellite-based system. GPS technology will be used to shorten routes, save time and fuel, reduce traffic delays, increase capacity, and permit controllers to monitor and manage aircraft with greater safety margins. Planes will be able to fly closer together, take more direct routes, and avoid delays caused by airport "stacking" as planes wait for an open runway. The FAA is also responsible for assessing and mitigating noise impacts on the ground associated with these changes in routes.

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For Santa Cruz County, the primary NextGen change has been to the San Francisco International Airport (SFO) approach route from the south. This route originates over the Monterey Bay. Before NextGen, the route traveled over the west side of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, and upper Bear Creek before crossing over Santa Clara County. The new NextGen route is titled SERFR and is shifted approximately 4 miles east. The route crosses over land at the Capitola Wharf and traverses over Capitola, Soquel, and the communities of North Rodeo Gulch, Happy Valley, Scotts Valley, and Upper Zayante.

As evidenced by the number of complaints received by both of our offices, as well as complaints received by the SFO Noise Abatement Office, the new route has created noise impacts that appear to be far more adverse than those of the former route. The airport received 0 noise complaints in January and 1 complaint was received in February, before the SERFR route was implemented. After implementation, there were 308 complaints received from 201 individuals in March and 1,572 complaints from 211 individuals in April. This rise in the number of noise complaints is unprecedented. There are now more citizens submitting noise complaints from Santa Cruz County than from all the communities located within San Mateo County that are much closer to the SFO Airport.

There are multiple factors that have created so much noise on the ground under the SERFR flight path. The flight altitudes of the SERFR route over Santa Cruz County are lower than the prior route. The new route crosses over land as low as 10,000 feet, whereas the prior route was closer to 14,000 feet. The lower the altitude of each plane, the greater the noise level on the ground. Residents report noise levels that interrupt conversation and working from home, ruin the quality of outdoor quiet, and wake family members from sleep.

An additional impact is from the frequency of these flights. With the concentration of the flight path over a narrow width of land, SFO reports a 50-fold increase in the number of flights for those living under or near the SERFR route. For example, prior to March 5, residents along the SERFR path typically had 3 airliners each day overhead, or one every 8 hours. Since March 5, residents now have at least 150 jets overhead daily, or about 10 an hour (fewer flights late at night). Residents report it is common for 5-10 jets to cross the sky separated by only 30-60 seconds each. This increase in frequency compounds and intensifies the noise impact. The SERFR route also calls for pilots to decelerate over Santa Cruz County. This deceleration creates more engine noise, which is clearly noticed by residents. Some flights engage their speed brakes – wing flaps – that also create a very noticeable sound on the ground. Finally, the valley terrain and coastal fog appear to contribute to increased noise levels. Sound waves from above reflect off valley walls, amplifying and reverberating the noise. Temperature inversions associated with coastal fog are known to reflect sound back to the ground and also contribute to worsened noise impacts.

It is important to note that the FAA was required to do community outreach in the areas potentially affected by the changes. Five community workshops were held in other affected counties, but not in Santa Cruz County. In addition, the analysis provided to the public by the FAA claimed that the new flight patterns would not have any noise impacts, which is clearly not the case based on the number of complaints.

Residents who are affected, some of whom are aviation experts, have organized into an advocacy group and have provided valuable information and analysis to us and to Congressman Farr. Their analysis of the noise impacts points to several steps that could mitigate the noise to satisfactory levels. These proposed steps include raising the altitudes of the planes, calling for planes to fly at constant speeds, spreading the flights over a wider area, and moving the flight path back to what it was before March 5. Through this process, we have also learned that the FAA is currently conducting an initial post-implementation evaluation of the new flight paths, a routine process that could result in more immediate remedies.


At our request, Congressman Farr and Congresswoman Eshoo met with the FAA Administrator in Washington, D.C., and carried our message regarding the significant and unacceptable noise impacts experienced by our residents. As a result, the FAA agreed to send Glen Martin, the Regional Administrator for the Western-Pacific Region, to meet with local elected officials and affected residents. Mr. Martin serves as the principal representative of the FAA Administrator and is the senior FAA official in the region. That meeting will take place here in Santa Cruz the week of June 21 and we will both attend, as will representatives from Congressman Farr's office. At that meeting, we intend to ask the FAA to analyze all of the noise complaints as part of its routine post-implementation evaluation of new flight paths, consider several of the possible remedies identified by the local aviation experts, and communicate back to us as soon as possible on their intended actions relative to mitigating the impacts, including their timeframe for implementation.

The purpose of this letter is to educate the Board regarding this issue and to make the Board aware of the next steps we intend to take to address the problem. We seek the Board's support of our actions and intend to report back to the Board in August on the results of our meeting with the FAA.

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Therefore, it is recommended that the Board take the following actions:

1. Receive this letter as an informational item.
2. Direct the Chairman to write a letter to the FAA outlining the information in this letter and designating us as representatives of our Board to discuss remedies with the FAA representative. This action will indicate our approval of the message and allow us to speak for the full Board with a unified voice.



JOHN LEOPOLD, Supervisor
First District

Sincerely,



BRUCE MCPHERSON, Supervisor
Fifth District

JL/BAM:lg

cc: Save Our Skies

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