AIR-TRAFFIC TOWERS WASTED MORE THAN $850 MILLION, WATCHDOG SAYS

News / Finance

The federal government has wasted more than $850 million over six years by operating inefficient air-traffic control towers, according to a watchdog audit.

At a time of fewer flights, the efficiency of the Federal Aviation Administration's facilities at airports ranging from large hubs to smaller private-plane strips varies widely, the Transportation Department's Inspector General found Monday.

The extra labor for air-traffic controllers and equipment to handle similar volumes of flights cost the government more than $140 million a year from 2008 through 2013, according to the report.

The findings come as the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee plans to propose creating a nonprofit corporation to take over the management of the FAA's air-traffic system, partly as a result of similar complaints. Representative Bill Shuster, a Pennsylvania Republican, said he would include the proposal in legislation this year.

FAA "towers function at considerably different levels of efficiency relative to each other," the report

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by Mitchell Behm, an assistant inspector general, said. “The performance gap between the relatively efficient towers and the least efficient towers was substantial.”

While the audit found poor efficiency at a wide range of airports, the bulk of the extra costs were at larger facilities. Ten large hubs accounted for at least half of the agency’s wasted costs.

FAA Objections

The FAA objected to the IG’s analysis, saying it didn’t take into account use of contractors. Efficiency comparisons can be misleading because of substantial differences in factors such as air traffic volume, airspace complexity and facility size, the FAA also said in the report.

Bloomberg News reported in 2012 that more than 100 full-time U.S. airports and radar rooms have so few flights late at night they should be shut under government guidelines.

FAA’s efforts to curb costs can run into Congressional interference. Lawmakers passed a measure increasing government aid to a tower at an airport used by Wal-Mart Stores Inc.’s fleet of corporate aircraft.

The most efficient airports included New York’s LaGuardia and Newark Liberty International, while poor-performing ones were in Orlando, Florida, and Salt Lake City

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