

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 11, 2013

The Honorable Ray LaHood
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Michael Huerta
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Secretary LaHood and Administrator Huerta:

We oppose the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) plan to cut air traffic control towers across the country, including 189 towers that are included in the Contract Tower Program, in response to the sequester mandated by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (Pub. 112-25).

We fear these cuts to control towers will compromise the FAA's stated mission of providing the safest, most efficient aerospace system in the world, and will put the flying public at risk, impair access to rural areas, jeopardize national and civil security missions, and cost jobs.

We request that the FAA pursue more efficient spending reductions that will not have such a devastating impact on air safety.

As you know, there are currently 251 contract towers nationwide providing air traffic control services to a wide range of users, including general aviation, commercial and cargo carriers, and the military. The FAA Contract Tower Program has successfully served airports that otherwise would not have air traffic control services, and increased the level of safety for pilots and rural communities since its inception 30 years ago.

On July 18, 2012, the Inspector General for the Department of Transportation (DOT) testified before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Aviation regarding its recent review of the Contract Tower Program. He stated that contract towers have a lower number and rate of reported safety incidents and deficiencies than comparable FAA towers.

In addition, the report found that the average *contract tower costs roughly \$1.5 million less to operate annually than a comparable FAA tower*, largely due to lower staffing and salary levels. Furthermore, the Contract Tower Program is the only program in the FAA subject to annual cost benefit analysis. To be eligible for the program, by definition, a tower must demonstrate annually that the benefits to the public exceed the costs to run the tower.

We, therefore, believe the proposed cuts are entirely inconsistent with the intent behind the 5 percent across-the-board spending reductions imposed by sequestration. The FAA's plan to cut 189 contract towers represents a 75 percent cut to the Contract Tower Program, which is inexplicably disproportionate to the 5 percent planned cuts to the remaining FAA budget. Furthermore, these towers were all in operation in 2009, when the FAA received less funding than they will under the sequestration.

The FAA's planned applications of these cuts seems especially inefficient considering the FAA still plans to continue spending on activities unrelated to safety, such as a planned conference in August, and does not plan to implement a hiring freeze or cut non-essential programs. On the other hand, if the FAA closes these towers all Americans will be put at risk. Contract towers manage air traffic control for approximately 28 percent of all control tower operations. If these towers are closed, aerospace efficiency will be compromised as other FAA facilities, potentially already short-staffed because of furloughs, are forced to pick up the slack.

Moreover, loss of control tower services at U.S. military bases will jeopardize civil and national security missions. Contract towers at military bases, such as Forbes Field, which also serves Fort Riley, provide a venue to train military pilots and deploy soldiers, serve as a stopover during long national flights, and provide shelter for aircraft during bad weather. Closure of the contract tower would impair these functions.

While we recognize that implementing sequestration cuts in the middle of a fiscal year is a unique challenge, the FAA has known about sequestration for more than 18 months, and it was given ample time and a framework to structure more balanced and responsible cuts. Given that the FAA had ample time to plan for these cuts, we would like a detailed explanation behind the current decision to make such unbalanced cuts to the Contract Tower Program.

Lastly, please describe the efforts that you have taken to soften the impact of these cuts to aviation safety, access to rural areas, critical pilot training, and jobs. Specifically, has the DOT considered asking Congress to use its budget transfer authority to reduce the impact of these cuts to safety and aerospace efficiency? We request that the FAA provide answers to these questions and use the savings from cuts to other, less efficient programs to avoid resorting to closures of contract towers.

Thank you again for your consideration. We look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,

