

FAA's Contract Tower Program: 27 Years and Counting

Compiled From Reports

Now in its 27th year, FAA's Contract Tower Program (FCT) has developed a solid following within Congress and the airport community for the added layer of safety it provides to the nation's aviation system, as well as for its cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

The growth of the program to its present level of 245 towers has come with many innovations that were advocated by the industry. Chief among these is the cost-sharing program, which allows airports below a designated threshold of operations to obtain the benefits of a control tower by contributing to the cost of its operation. In fiscal year 2009, Congress provided \$110 million for the fully funded program plus \$9 million for the cost-share program.

"FAA's Contract Tower Program, by any measure, has been an unqualified success story for 27 years," commented Rep. John L. Mica (R-Fla.), Republican leader of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. "Continued support in Congress for this program reflects the value in terms of safety and performance that contract towers provide to our nation's air transportation system. The program is critically important to smaller airports across our country and is also a great deal for the American taxpayers."

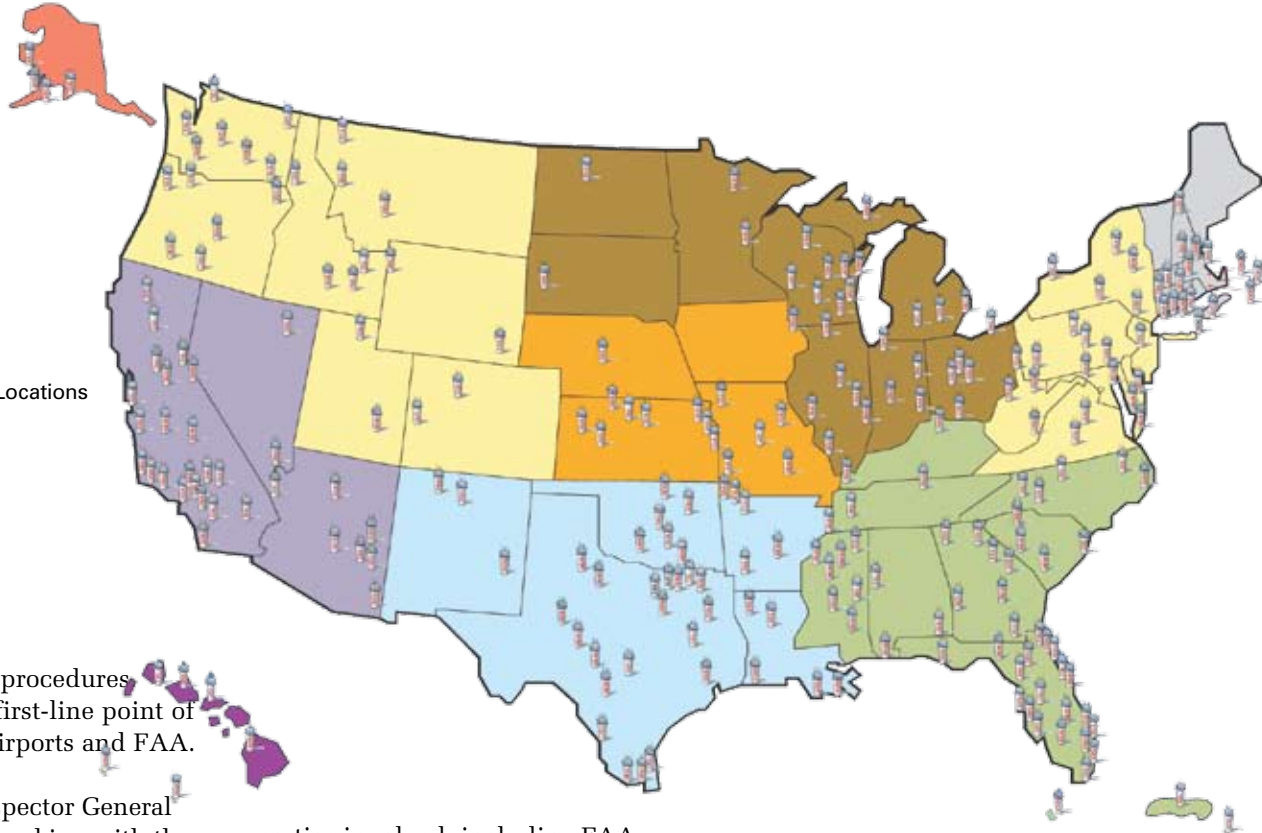
FAA's Thomas Jones manages the program, which has been reorganized into the FAA Contract Tower and Weather Group (CTWG).

As Jones explained, the FCT program now is divided into two teams — the Contract Tower Requirements Team and the Contract Tower Operations Team. The requirements team is comprised of Team Lead Ricky Atkins and two team members who are responsible for ensuring that all new towers are in compliance with applicable requirements and have the required minimum equipment to function as federal contract towers in the nation's airspace. They coordinate new starts into the program, manage the facility configuration, ensure program goals are on track and focus attention on the interfaces between activities being handled by different team members.

The operations team is comprised of Team Lead Ken Cunningham and one team member. The team performs liaison functions between headquarters, service centers and regional/district offices to develop and implement a service delivery verification program and integrate FAA headquarters and service area resources to support contract tower operation activities. Additionally, the team provides oversight for implementation of the Safety Management System (SMS).

In addition to the teams at headquarters, the CTWG enlists the services of program implementation managers located in each service area. Their role is to ensure air traffic control services are provided in





FAA Contract Tower Locations

accordance with FAA policies and procedures. They are still the first-line point of contact between airports and FAA.

Former DOT Inspector General Ken Mead began working with the contract tower program in 1997. At that time, several members of Congress, the DOT secretary and officials from the Office of Management and Budget requested that Mead examine the cost-effectiveness of the program.

“What we consistently found in audit after audit (and it remains true today) is that the contract tower program is a model, not only of cost-effectiveness but of safety,” Mead said. “All the metrics show this, so this is a fact-based judgment. Maintaining safety is the compass of the program, and the contract tower providers and FAA have done an exceptional job in this regard.”

AAAE determined in 1996 that this growing program would benefit from a formal association of contract towered airports and the companies that have contracts to manage the towers. As a result, AAAE created the U.S. Contract Tower Association (USCTA) to promote the contract tower program and to enhance aviation safety at smaller airports.

Spencer Dickerson, senior executive vice president of AAAE and executive director of USCTA, noted that, “Since its inception in 1982, FAA’s Contract Tower Program continues to receive positive endorsements from all

parties involved, including FAA, the National Transportation Safety Board, DOT’s Inspector General, airport management, Congress and, most importantly, the users of the aviation system. This government/industry partnership is an excellent example of government and industry working together to the advantage of the flying public.”

Walt Strong, administrator of the University of Oklahoma’s Max Westheimer Airport and USCTA policy board chair, stated that his airport has been a member of USCTA for more than a decade.

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“With all the continued talk about NexGen and how it will enhance our air traffic control system, I fondly refer to the federal contract tower program as ‘Now-Gen’ since it positively affects the nation’s air traffic control system right now,” Strong stated. “Towers in this program handle some 25 percent

of all the nation’s control tower operations. That’s ‘Now-Gen’erating a significant impact on air safety.”

While lower traffic counts are being reported by control towers nationwide, student pilot activity is on the rise at Westheimer, according to Strong. “Students in the university’s professional pilot program continue to fly in a program that has grown larger each year since the late 1990s. While the university does a tremendous job training students, sustaining a superb safety record and maintaining their equipment to the highest standards, it seems to me that the safety catalyst in our system, wherein professional pilots and students alike coexist, is the controllers in our tower. These people do a magnificent job in keeping students safely sequenced with other daily arrivals and departures of corporate and military traffic that do business in Norman and the surrounding Oklahoma City area.”

Strong added, “Thanks to our friends in Congress and FAA, the accolades keep coming to a program that not only saves the taxpayer millions of dollars each year but is also “Now-Gen”erating a significant and positive impact on air safety across the U.S.” 