FAA Turned Blind Eye on Report of Chronic Fatigue of Air Traffic Controllers

iVan Budimir August 11, 2015

Every day, air traffic controllers track thousands of flights across the U.S. Photo: NASA

The FAA released a "new" study on Monday, however, the Associated Press reported that there was a study with identical results released back in 2012.

(Newswire.net -- August 11, 2015) -- NASA's inter-agency study for the FAA found that air traffic controllers are battling a chronic fatigue, which could influence their work efficiency, the Daily Mail Online reported.

The 225-page study was kept under wraps for four years, according to the AP, who obtained a draft copy from 2011, and a nearly identical copy from 2012, after the FAA declined the news agency's insight.

The draft version allegedly indicates that the FAA was aware that air traffic controllers work schedules often led to chronic fatigue, making them less alert and a safety risk to the national air traffic system.

The survey used in the study involved 3,268 controllers who answered inquiries on their work schedules and sleeping habits. Also, the study measured psychomotor vigilance and timed reactions of some 20 air traffic controllers who accepted to wear wrist-actigraphy sensors.

The findings say the average sleep time of a controller is 5.8 hours over the working week. This stands for controllers who work nightshifts, which begins at 10 pm and ends at 6am.

For those working the midnight shift, 70 percent said they caught themselves "about to doze off" while actively working.

Nearly two in 10 controllers had committed they make errors – such as bringing planes too close together – and more than half said the errors were due to fatigue.

During periods of low air traffic and the human body’s natural pressure to sleep during certain times of the day, "Chronic fatigue may pose a significant risk to controller alertness, and hence to the safety of the ATC (air traffic control) system," the study concluded.

Reportedly, controller fatigue had been implicated in several deadly accidents and incidents, such as the Comair 5191 accident in Lexington, and Kentucky in 2006, which killed 47 passengers and 2 of its 3-crew members when the plane ran off the runway.

The FAA admitted in a statement that it was aware of NASA findings in 2012. However, those findings were dismissed because the "NASA don't understand the 24-7 air traffic operational environment," the FAA explains.

The FAA also said the agency’s results were “judgmental rather than quantitative,” and based on “sourcing opinion versus science."

The FAA, however, said it has taken measures considering a self-declaration of the fatigue policy, and an increased number of hours off for the midnight shift.