

New FAA rules to combat controller fatigue

After incidents in which air traffic controllers fell asleep on the job, the agency will let them listen to the radio and read to stay alert and use sick time if they are too tired to do the job.

Controllers at John F. Kennedy International Airport and others will now be allowed to listen to the radio and read to help stay alert during overnight shifts when traffic is light. (Mark Lennihan / Associated Press / April 20, 2010)

Reporting from Washington (AP)- The Federal Aviation Administration on Friday announced new steps to help prevent air traffic controllers from falling asleep on the job, including allowing controllers to use sick or annual leave time if they are too tired to work.

Controllers will also now be allowed to listen to the radio and read to help stay alert during overnight shifts when traffic is light, under an agreement between the FAA and the National Air Traffic Controllers Assn.

However, the policy changes don't allow controllers to take naps while on break or to schedule naps during overnight shifts even though sleep scientists say that's the most effective way to refresh tired workers.

Currently, controllers caught napping, even when on break, can be fired.

"While on break, air traffic controllers are expected to conduct themselves professionally and be available for recall at all times," the agency said in a statement.

Since April, the FAA has disclosed seven instances of controllers sleeping on the job and two other instances of controllers who didn't respond to attempts to contact them. In one case, two airliners landed at Reagan National Airport outside Washington, D.C., without assistance from a controller who has acknowledged dozing off.

In another case, FAA has said a medical flight with a seriously ill patient had to circle an airport in Reno, Nev., before landing because the lone controller on duty had fallen asleep.