

## NASA database offers another view of air safety

One pilot said he could hear another plane's engines as it passed within 400 feet overhead at 15,000 feet. Another said his commercial jet nearly struck a fuel truck on a runway but managed to stop as frightened passengers alerted him - with two feet to spare.

Their accounts appear in a rarely-examined federal database kept by NASA that contains far more reports than official Federal Aviation Administration logs because it's anonymous and is not subject to scrutiny or supplemented by other witness accounts.

Pilots, air traffic controllers, flight crew members and aircraft maintenance workers can file to NASA their reports of near collisions, miscommunication, pilot fatigue, equipment failures and other mishaps.

The Watchdog Institute reviewed NASA's database of tens of thousands of reports to identify at least 271 for the San Diego area since 2000. It found 45 accounts by pilots who said they had to bank, dive or climb - sometimes violently - to avoid colliding with aircraft or terrain that in some cases came as close as 30 to 500 feet.

NASA has no investigative or disciplinary authority and is therefore considered neutral territory where pilots and others can disclose mishaps, usually with impunity.

NASA is "in a wonderful position to be a clearinghouse of information and see patterns ... to head off problems," said John King, a pilot, instructor and co-owner of King Schools near Montgomery Field. He said he incorporates what he learns from NASA's monthly safety roundup into his teaching.

Members of the aviation community cautioned that the reports are not statistically reliable but Linda Connell, director of NASA's program, said it has its value.

"We believe that the real power of (the database) lies in the report narratives," she said.

Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman Laura Brown in Washington, D.C., noted that NASA's program, while a trendsetter when established in the 1970s, is one piece of a bigger data picture the FAA relies upon to evaluate matters of safety.

Airport officials said the NASA reports describe a tiny fraction of the takeoffs and landings that take place at county airports. For instance, 99 reports made to NASA over 10 years concerning McClellan-Palomar Airport, out of about 200,000 operations there annually, is statistically negligible at .0000495 percent.

"There are issues in these reports that may be considered breaches of safety but not necessarily as significant," said Peter Drinkwater, director of San Diego County airports, which include Gillespie, McClellan-Palomar, Ramona, Fallbrook, Borrego Valley, Jacumba, Agua Caliente and Ocotillo.

Jim Swain, a former airport tower manager and air-traffic controller who is now a consultant for county airports, said he has written reports to NASA as a controller, and reviewed reports as a manager. He said one weakness of the system is the NASA reports are based on one person's perceptions and don't include the perspectives of all the parties involved in an incident.

When it comes to identifying safety issues, he said he looks to official reports, such as annual safety reviews by the FAA and voice and radar recordings. Alexandra Caldwell, spokeswoman for the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, believes the NASA program, as well as a couple of other similar ones instituted in the last few years, are improving safety.

"It's a more safety-minded culture now," Caldwell said. Controllers, for instance, "are not being penalized for reporting errors. Our controllers feel more comfortable raising the red flag on problems in the system."

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2011/feb/15/nasa-has-another-take-on-air-safety-reports-to/>