FAA investigates 2 more snoozing air traffic controllers, including one in Fort Worth

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Federal Aviation Administration is investigating two more cases of air traffic controllers falling asleep on the job, including one in Fort Worth, the agency's top administrator disclosed to Congress on Tuesday.

Both incidents occurred in January at radar centers that handle high-altitude air traffic, FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt said.

The Fort Worth controller was observed with his eyes closed while he was supposed to be working at the FAA's facility just south of Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. He was reprimanded.

The other was found sleeping at his workstation in Los Angeles and has been suspended pending the outcome of disciplinary proceedings, the FAA said later in a statement.

At the hearing before the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation aviation subcommittee, a government watchdog said a surge in errors by air traffic controllers appears to reflect a real increase, not just better reporting, as FAA officials claim.

Transportation Department Inspector General Calvin Scovel said there has been a 39 percent increase in errors at air traffic control facilities that handle aircraft at high altitudes even though there's been no change in recent years in automated error-counting equipment at those facilities.

"That would indicate an absolute increase," Scovel said.

Overall, errors in which planes come too close in the air increased 53 percent from 2009 to 2010. The controllers' job is to keep aircraft at safe distances.

The increase in errors, as well as a series of incidents in March and April in which controllers fell asleep or made high-profile mistakes, has raised concerns in Congress about the safety of the air traffic system.

Babbitt, also testifying, attributed the increase to policy changes that encourage controllers to disclose errors without fear of punishment and to an automated reporting system being phased in at regional radar centers that handle airport approaches and departures.

However, errors disclosed under the voluntary, nonpunitive reporting program aren't counted in the FAA's official error tally. That means they can't account for the increase in errors, Scovel said.

Scovel also urged that the FAA be guided by medical science when deciding whether to allow controllers scheduled nap breaks during overnight shifts -- something sleep scientists recommend. Babbitt and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood have said paying controllers to sleep on the job is unacceptable.

It would be "cold comfort" to the family of a victim of a crash caused by controller error that the

controller wasn't allowed to sleep on the job, Scovel said.

Greg Belenky, a sleep expert at Washington State University, said all night shift workers suffer from fatigue no matter how employers try to manipulate schedules. The only solution that works, he said, is brief naps during night shifts.

The head of the controllers union said a large increase in new controllers who need on-the-job training is partly responsible for the increase in errors. The FAA plans to hire 11,000 controllers through 2019.

All those new controllers have to receive on-the-job training from current controllers, placing a serious strain on air traffic operations, according to testimony by Paul Rinaldi, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association.

Babbitt disagreed. About 25 percent of controllers are in training, down significantly compared with the last few years and more in line with the norm, he said.

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