

US “sequester” cuts shut 149 air traffic control towers

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Around one third of all air traffic control towers in the United States are slated to close April 7 as part of the sequester cuts that a recently passed Senate bill would make permanent.

The cuts would close 149 control towers across the country, imperil safety and significantly reduce the integration of rural areas into the national transport system. Between 750 and 1,100 jobs are to be cut as a result.

As part of the sequester, \$1 billion was cut from the Department of Transportation in 2013, with \$637 million of this taken from the Federal Aviation Administration. Many of the FAA's reductions are to come from cutting contracted control tower service at 149 airports, each with fewer than 10,000 commercial takeoffs and landings a year. Without a control tower, planes will still be able to use the airport, but they have to rely on direct radio contact with other pilots.

Control service was added to many of these regional airports to facilitate service to larger airline spokes. In around 190 airports, management of these control towers was contracted out. So far none of the FAA-staffed control towers are being eliminated, but they may face other cuts.

All 15,000 controllers employed by the FAA are facing furlough days, and overnight shifts may be eliminated at an additional 72 control towers. All of these cuts decrease the efficiency and safety of takeoff and landing.

Walter, a director of a regional airport in the Rocky Mountain area, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the effects of tower closings.

“When you remove a local tower, it is true that pilots use radar and share the same frequency to communicate. But it is only propaganda to claim there is some sort of redundancy or to make it seem wasteful

to have a tower because planes are covered by radar.

“In many cases, especially in the mountainous West, a plane has to be as high as 10,000 feet to be picked up by radar, and the pilots are not seeing anything, they're just talking to each other. Much of the activity takes place below that ceiling, including ground movements that are watched by the controllers in the tower.”

Even with the smaller craft that frequent these airports, miscommunication can have disastrous consequences. In 1996, confusion at the airport in Quincy, Illinois, which had no control tower, claimed 14 lives. Two planes were preparing for takeoff as another was looking to land, and radio difficulties resulted in a crash.

Walter added, “The whole process [of deciding to close the towers] was fast-tracked. The FAA sent its first letter on March 5 and told communities to write back by March 13. They made the closing announcement on March 22 and now they are going to be shutting the lights by early April.

“All of a sudden they've cut out the contract towers. Next on the list are the newer FAA-staffed towers; there's around 40 of them. They've been looking to close these towers for a long time and see the sequester as a golden opportunity.”

The cuts to air traffic control have many similarities to the attack on the postal service and other basic infrastructure. These elementary aspects of efficient communication and safe travel are being sacrificed to the profit demands of the financial elite. The effect on rural areas can be drastic.

“The commercial airlines are already serving fewer small and rural communities, which are less profitable. With less controller service, they are going to be even less willing to serve these areas. These places will lose a critical component for economic development and

become even more isolated.”

Without effective integration with the rest of the world, conditions in isolated parts of the country can almost seem like they are going back in time. Air traffic control helps coordinate firefighting and medical evacuation. As service decreases, isolated areas will be left with limited access to the basics of modern life.



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