

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

December 7, 2015

The Honorable Michael P. Huerta
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20591

Dear Administrator Huerta:

We write to express our concern with the possible closure of the Terminal Radar Approach Control (TRACON) facility at Grant County International Airport in Moses Lake, Washington, and the reallocation of TRACON controllers to another airport.

Grant County International Airport provides unique civilian and military aviation services to the aviation industry, both in support of national security interests and to the local community. It serves a wide range of aircraft from two-seat, general aviation trainers to cutting edge commercial and military aircraft. While weather conditions, open skies, and long runways make it an ideal location for such diverse air service, the combination of the Control Tower and TRACON facility is central to the airport's ability to safely support pilot and aircraft certification, military training, regional aerial firefighting, and flight testing. As a result, Grant County International Airport is the third busiest airport in Washington state.

The State of Washington has a long and rich aerospace history, in which Grant County International Airport has and continues to play a central role. Grant County International Airport provides aviation industry leaders a location to conduct important aircraft and pilot certification and testing, all of which is made possible by the airport's TRACON facility. This includes Rejected Take Off situations, simulated or actual equipment failures, touch-and-go landings, full stop and goes, wide area pattern work, and other operations that require an aircraft to hold on a runway or execute unusual maneuvers overhead. Very rarely does an aircraft arrive at Grant County International Airport and simply taxi off the runway as is the case at most other airports.

The Boeing Company has operated countless commercial and military flight test programs and crew training operations at the airport. Boeing and their customers use Grant County International Airport to conduct test flights of all commercial aircraft prior to delivery, resulting in 250 to 300 flights per month, a figure that is only expected to grow as production rates increase. Additionally, Seattle-based AeroTEC has consistently used Grant County International Airport to develop advanced aerospace products. In a newly formed partnership, AeroTEC will work with Mitsubishi Aircraft of Japan – a company that normally does not operate in the United States – to conduct aircraft certification tests of its new Mitsubishi Regional Jet at Grant County International Airport next year.

In addition to supporting civil aviation, Grant County International Airport is a critical training ground for the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy. C-17s from Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) operate on the assault strip, P-3s and P-8s from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island conduct touch-and-go training, F-15s from the Oregon Air National Guard and EA-18Gs from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island come to operate within the airport's pattern, and KC-135s come from Fairchild Air Force Base (AFB) for training exercises.

For JBLM in particular, the conditions and characteristics of Grant County International Airport cannot be replicated elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest. The constraints of more urban environments in the Puget Sound region require that much of the C-17 training and readiness is conducted at Grant County International Airport, with more than 700 training sorties occurring every year. In the case of Fairchild AFB, the airport provides easy access for military aircrew training from instrument to radar visual pattern work to wartime missions, allows training to occur at times when it cannot at Fairchild AFB due to weather or runway closures, and serves as their ready reserve base in the event of a natural disaster or other emergency. Finally, when the U.S. Air Force cannot land at JBLM or Fairchild AFB due to weather or other issues, their interim destination is Grant County International Airport.

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) also relies upon Grant County International Airport, which serves as a regional Interagency Tanker Base for their largest firefighting aircraft in the Pacific Northwest. As the West experiences more frequent and severe wildfires, it is essential that the USFS be able to deploy their firefighting assets quickly and efficiently. We saw firsthand the benefits that Grant County International Airport can provide this summer during Washington's worst wildfire season in state history. Grant County International Airport facilitated the use of one runway for take-offs and another runway for landings to help reduce the turn-around times and maximize the use of aircraft to drop flame retardants in affected areas in the Pacific Northwest.

Finally, Grant County International Airport supports the future of aviation by training the next generation of pilots. Since 1966, Big Bend Community College has trained aviation mechanics and pilots at Grant County International Airport and has grown into the largest collegiate aviation flight training program in the Pacific Northwest. Flight schools from Ellensburg and Spokane also use this airport to conduct instrument approaches and pattern work. As demand for skilled pilots by the commercial airline industry increases, Grant County International Airport is doing its part to produce high quality pilots.

It is the safety and flexibility afforded by the TRACON facility that allows Grant County International Airport to serve such a wide range of activities and missions. At most airports, aircraft land and depart in a linear flow in which the sequence is called by the TRACON and which would be fairly easily managed remotely. At Grant County International Airport, however, the Control Tower calls the sequence to the TRACON in order to ensure safe and efficient operations and to allow for the high level of flexibility and responsiveness demanded by the diverse combination of activities that unfold at the airport on a daily basis. Aircraft are often passed from the TRACON to the Control Tower and back again as they go through various testing and certification maneuvers, all while coordinating with other aircraft in the same airspace. Controllers must adjust to many types of requests from many different users, which are

often time sensitive in nature. If the TRACON facility were located remotely, it would be much less accommodating to the same type of activities currently conducted at Grant County International Airport, which could result in the users experiencing degraded service and increased costs to the federal government and businesses.

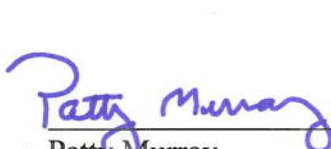
The sequencing at Grant County International Airport is further impacted by the airport's unique construction and size. Grant County International Airport is home to five intersecting and non-intersecting converging runways, including two of the longest runways in North America. All five runways are often being used by aircraft with specific needs at the same time, which frequently results in several different flight patterns in play simultaneously.

The FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (Public Law 112-95) requires the Federal Aviation Administration to develop a plan to realign and consolidate TRACON facilities without adversely affecting safety. We believe that closing the TRACON facility at Grant County International Airport and reallocating TRACON controllers to another airport, even in the region, will negatively impact the safety of the airport. Consolidation of this TRACON facility would force changes in the way Grant County International Airport supports the civilian and military missions. Such an outcome would negatively impact national security and military readiness, wildfire response, commercial aviation testing and certification, and collegiate aviation training.

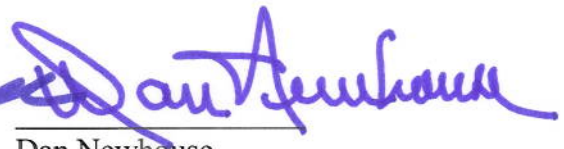
We ask that you strongly consider our concerns and prevent the closure of the TRACON facility at Grant County International Airport.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,


Patty Murray
United States Senator


Maria Cantwell
United States Senator


Dan Newhouse
Member of Congress