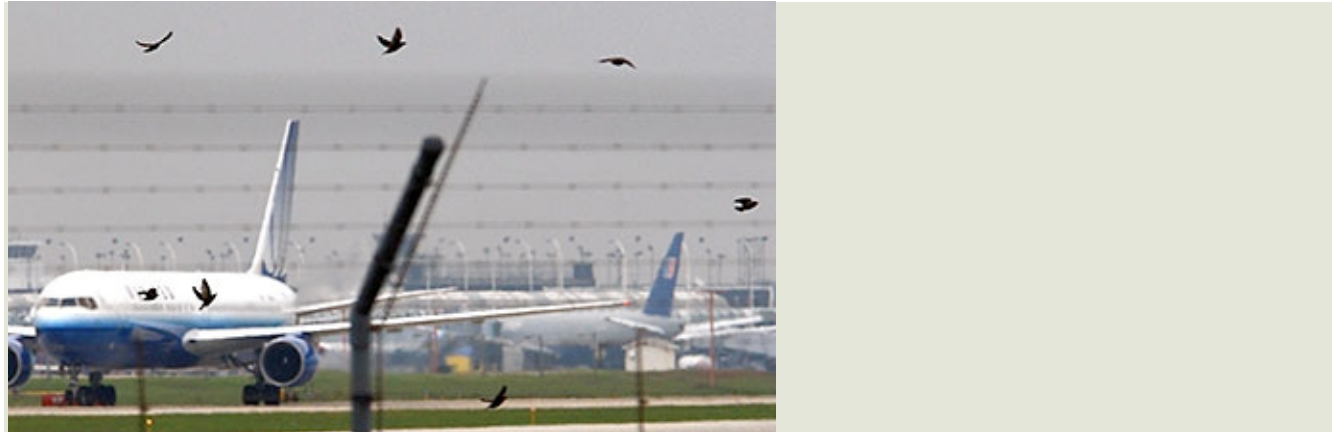


O'Hare Airport hit for safety violations in FAA report

Tribune exclusive FAA's warning notice lists hazards that endanger takeoffs and landings



By Jon Hilkevitch

September 24, 2009

Federal inspectors found numerous violations at O'Hare International Airport that endanger airplanes at the most critical phases of flight – takeoffs and landings, officials said Wednesday.

The safety breaches, uncovered by the Federal Aviation Administration during routine inspections last month at O'Hare, range from debris on runways to excessive amounts of tall grass and weeds that create hazards for planes by attracting birds and other wildlife.

A warning notice from the FAA to Chicago said the inspections show that O'Hare is seriously out of compliance with federal aviation law. The notice, called a "letter of correction," also chastised the Chicago Department of Aviation for what the federal agency called a pattern of false statements in its self-inspection program.

"The daily self-inspection records do not reflect actual conditions in the field, violations have not been noted on the self-inspection records that are evident in the field," said the FAA letter, which was obtained by the Tribune.

Most of the violations have already been corrected, and the rest, involving the training of workers driving on the airfield and filing accurate self-inspection reports, will be resolved by the end of November, said Karen Pride, spokeswoman for the Aviation Department.

An object as small as a stone on a runway can pose a danger to flight by being ingested into aircraft jet turbines or piercing a fuel tank and sparking an explosion and fire.

Yet FAA inspectors found rocks, garbage and wood survey stakes used during construction on runways and taxiways at O'Hare.

Collisions between aircraft and birds are a constant threat to safety at airports like O'Hare that are surrounded by woods and waterways.

The FAA has told aviation officials nationwide to practice extreme vigilance in controlling bird populations in the wake of a US Airways jetliner crash-landing in New York's Hudson River in January after flying into geese as the plane climbed up from LaGuardia Airport. All on board survived.

The problems at O'Hare the FAA cited in its warning notice are considered major violations – not just housekeeping issues – because airfields are supposed to be sterile environments free of debris and other hazards that could interfere with flights.

The FAA inspectors determined that the wildlife hazard management program at O'Hare "is not being complied with regarding 6" grass height and modification of vegetation on the airfield."

"All paved surfaces should be free of any type of vegetation at all times," said the report written by Tricia Halpin, a FAA airport certification safety inspector.

During an inspection of O'Hare's newest runway that opened last year, the FAA found rocks and construction debris in the safety areas at the ends of the runway, on the airport's northern sector. It is important that safety areas be maintained as pristinely as runways because they are used in emergencies when planes overrun the runway during landing or must abort a takeoff and need additional pavement to stop safely.

Inspectors also identified "potentially hazardous ruts, humps (and) depressions" on the surface of the new pavement in the safety areas of the runway. The FAA inspectors uncovered similar problems on O'Hare's longest runway that serves the largest commercial planes carrying hundreds of passengers.

Other violations the FAA cited include incomplete training of personnel working on the airfield and record-keeping problems. One violation reported included instances in which airport workers were allowed to drive vehicles on the airfield without receiving all of the required training, officials said.

Recurrent driver training and testing were also being put off for "numerous employees" until the final weeks before the expiration of the drivers' badges allowing them to operate vehicles on the airfield, the FAA said.

In some areas where the FAA spotted lapses in airport operations, including daily field inspections and garbage removal, the inspectors said the problems reflect "insufficient or unqualified personnel to comply with the regulation. Additional training is needed."

Chicago Aviation Commissioner Rosemarie Andolino was out of town Wednesday and unavailable for

comment, Pride said.

But Andolino and other city aviation officials are taking the FAA warning very seriously, Pride said. “The highest priority we have at the airport is safety and the cleanliness of the runways and the taxiways,” she said.

All airport operations supervisors will be required to view instructional videos on how to properly conduct self inspections, Pride said. In addition, O’Hare recently added extra inspections of all taxiways and runways, she said.

O’Hare air-traffic controller Craig Burzych said he noticed that in the last week the city has temporarily shut down runways for up to 45 minutes at a time during daylight hours to carry out major inspections for debris.

“They said they were missing things at night,” said Burzych, who is a runway safety representative at O’Hare for the National Air Traffic Controllers Association.

Andolino took over responsibility for O’Hare and Midway Airport this year when Mayor Richard Daley promoted her to a dual city aviation post. Andolino, 42, already served as director since 2003 of the O’Hare Modernization Program, a \$15 billion runway expansion project.

Some airline officials who have worked closely with Andolino on O’Hare expansion questioned the move to have one individual in charge of two very complex and time-consuming programs. Daley said that when he expanded Andolino’s responsibilities in February, it made sense to consolidate all aviation activities.

But the findings in the new FAA inspections raise doubts about the ability of Andolino and her department heads to provide sufficient oversight on daily maintenance issues and operations at O’Hare, officials said.

“It’s hard to tell whether the airport management in Chicago has not been keeping up with the physical plant. But this is a shot across the bow of the airport to get its act together,” said Frank Ayers, executive vice president at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University’s campus in Prescott, Ariz.

jhilkevitch@tribune.com