

FLYING AROUND HUMBOLDT AIRPORTS

SUMMARY

While reviewing reports by previous Grand Juries, the 2014-15 Humboldt County Grand Jury discovered a 2005 report regarding the Humboldt County Department of Public Works' Aviation Division. In reviewing the report, it was found that only the commercial airport in McKinleyville was investigated. The current Humboldt County Grand Jury decided to do an expanded follow-up investigation that included the commercial airport and five county general aviation airports. The six county airports are the California Redwood Coast Humboldt County Airport (CRCHCA), Murray Field, Rohnerville Airport, Garberville Airport, Dinsmore Airport and Kneeland Airport.

After visits to the six county airports, interviews with department personnel and relevant community members, review of current budgets and examination of state airport inspection notification letters for each general aviation airport, the Humboldt County Grand Jury discovered facts that led to findings and recommendations about the Department of Public Works and the Aviation Division. A summary of key findings and recommendations are:

Department of Public Works:

The Humboldt County Grand Jury learned that the California Department of Transportation's (Caltrans) Division of Aeronautics annually inspects all five general aviation airports to certify that they meet federal standards for maintenance and security. Inspection notification letters identifying issues that need to be addressed to ensure operational safety of each airport are sent to the Director of Public Works. After reviewing the most recent notification letters for each general aviation airport, the Humboldt County Grand Jury found that each airfield had deferred maintenance issues that needed to be addressed to enhance their operational safety. For example, all the airports need trees topped or removed. In fact, the Dinsmore Airport is in danger of having its state airport permit suspended on July 1, 2015 because continuing unresolved issues have not been addressed to the satisfaction of the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics. Also, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) has an airport advisory committee to advise them on matters regarding aviation in the county. Public Works does not share the inspection notification letters with that committee.

The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that the Department of Public Works address, in a timely manner, the issues stated in the Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics' annual inspection notification letters for each general aviation airport to enhance their operational safety. It also recommends that the Director of Public Works share the annual inspection notification letters with the Humboldt County Airport Advisory Committee.

Aviation Division:

The Public Works Aviation Division's overall fund balance has been in the red since Fiscal Year 2009-10. The Humboldt County Grand Jury reviewed the Department of Public Works' 2014-15 budget. There are 19 positions in the Aviation Division. Presently, seven of those positions are frozen, including Airport Manager. The Director of Public Works acts as the manager with 16 % of his salary paid through the Aviation Division budget. The Aviation Division is also subsidizing a security cost difference of \$85,000 at CRCHCA this fiscal year. Further examination showed that there is duplication of services between the Department of Public Works' Aviation and General Services Divisions in certain areas. It was acknowledged in the most recent county budget report that the Aviation Division will be unable to submit a balanced budget for the 2015-16 budget year.

The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that the Aviation Division and the Humboldt County Sheriff's Department strategize ways to reduce the cost differential for security services at CRCHCA. It also recommends that the BOS direct the County Administrative Officer to perform an audit of the internal procedures between the Public Works' Aviation and General Services Divisions to eliminate any duplication of services. Furthermore, the Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that the BOS direct the Airport Aviation Advisory Committee to recommend alternatives to the BOS for realignment of the Aviation Division outside of the Humboldt County Department of Public Works.

BACKGROUND

After researching past Grand Jury reports, the Humboldt County Grand Jury discovered that the county regional air transportation system had never been thoroughly reviewed. Only once, in 2005, was the main airport reviewed. The present Humboldt County Grand Jury could find no evidence that the other county airports had ever been inspected or reviewed.

The Aviation Division, under the auspices of the Humboldt County Department of Public Works, provides for the Humboldt County regional air transportation system. It administers and maintains one commercial service airport and five general aviation airports. By federal regulations, it is responsible for maintenance, upkeep and security of all the county airfields. The five general aviation airports, through annual inspections, are certified and permitted by the California Department of Transportation's, (Caltrans) Division of Aeronautics with oversight by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The FAA also annually inspects Humboldt County's only commercial service airport, CRCHCA.

Since the Humboldt County air transportation system is an essential economic component of the region, the Humboldt County Grand Jury believes it is important to get a better understanding of the system. The Humboldt County Grand Jury wanted to know how the system worked, does it meet the federal standards for maintenance and security and what are the financial implications for operation of the air transportation system.

After an initial review of the Public Works' Aviation Division, through interviews, site inspections and budget analysis, the Humboldt County Grand Jury concluded that an investigation was warranted.

METHODOLOGY

Members of the Humboldt County Grand Jury made scheduled site visits to each of the airports. Interviews were completed with department personnel and other relevant community members. The most recent Aviation Division budgets were reviewed. Research was completed in the history, rules, and regulations of the FAA. The most recent Caltrans Division of Aeronautics' inspection notification letters addressing the maintenance and security issues of county airports to enhance operational safety were reviewed. Pertinent information from those letters is included in this report.

DISCUSSION

California Redwood Coast Humboldt County Airport: The CRCHCA is located in McKinleyville and covers 745 acres. The FAA categorizes it as a primary commercial service airport. CRCHCA has two asphalt runways, an airport terminal with restaurant, parking facilities, 17 recently constructed T-Hangars and multiple other structures on the property. The Coast Guard Air Station is adjacent to the airport. A terminal expansion was completed in 2009. Renovations of expanded passenger area space included new baggage claim, car rental, seating and ticket lobbies areas. Several years later the runways were extended several hundred feet and a system to meet runway safety area (RSA) regulations was constructed.

Staffing at CRCHCA includes a Program Coordinator (a Certified Member of the Association of Airport Executives), Fiscal Assistant, Facility Maintenance Mechanic, Building Maintenance Custodian, three Supervising Airport Service Workers and five Airport Service Workers. The Director of Public Works oversees the Aviation Division with 16% of his salary budgeted through the Aviation Division budget. There are 19 budgeted positions in the Aviation Division. According to the most recent county budget, seven of those positions are frozen including Airport Manager.

CRCHCA provides the majority of operating funds for the Aviation Division. Besides FAA grants, the main generated revenues for the airport are ticketed passenger fees, parking fees, fuel sales and hangar rentals. The Division's overall fund balance has been in the red since the 2009-10 fiscal year (FY). Late in that FY, Delta left. During 2010-11, Horizon left. During 2011-12, fuel revenues plunged due to the Coast Guard constructing their own fuel tank. Recently a \$145,000 unanticipated cost was accrued for tree topping services in the flight path area of the airport. It was acknowledged in the most recent county budget report that the Aviation Division will be unable to submit a balanced budget for the 2015-16 FY. The Grand Jury also discovered that there is a duplication of services in many areas between the Aviation Division and the Public Works General Services Division, including accounts payable, accounts receivable, budgeting and grant applications.

There are many factors contributing to the Aviation Division's continued negative fund balance. The Grand Jury identified several key areas of concern.

The more airline business an airport has, the more federal dollars it can attract. The FAA collects passenger boarding (enplanement) data to support its Airport Improvement Program (AIP). This data is important because commercial airports, such as CRCHCA, receive AIP funding based on apportionment formula calculations of their annual enplanement numbers. The higher the enplanement numbers, the more funding an airport will receive. In 2007 CRCHCA had 105,969 enplanements with a northern route to Portland (Horizon) and two southern routes, one to San Francisco (United Express) and one to Los Angeles (Horizon). In 2013, there were 56,682 enplanements with just the one route to San Francisco. This decline has affected the ticketed passenger fees, parking fees and fuel sales. The most obvious way to increase passenger boarding numbers would be to find a second airline with expanded route options.

Presently, in the airline industry there is a lack of qualified pilots and regional aircraft. Also, there is a competitive market for recruitment, as many other similar small communities around the country are trying to expand air service. Even with these constraints, in 2012, American Airlines offered the county airline service to Los Angeles International Airport. An apparent deal failed to materialize. The stated reason for the lost opportunity was that the county did not have a minimum revenue guarantee (MRG) in place. MRG funds lessen the financial risk an airline takes when it flies to and from a small community, where passengers aren't always guaranteed. The county spent millions of dollars at CRCHCA to renovate the terminal and improve the runways and yet when air service was reduced to one airline (United Express), there was not a mechanism in place to secure MRG funds for negotiations to recruit additional air service.

Through its investigation the Humboldt County Grand Jury found conflicting information as to how the county let this opportunity for a second airline service slip away. This includes what person was the lead negotiator with the authority to make a deal with an airline for Board of Supervisors (BOS) approval. When negotiating with a competitive private sector business like an airline, rapid response time is imperative. A process with the least bureaucracy possible is needed. To date, no new offers have been presented to the county even though various county officials routinely attend nationwide airline recruitment meetings and Fly Humboldt, the local organization interested in broadening local air travel options, has now raised over a million dollars for the MRG fund.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) regulations stipulate that if an airport has less than 250,000 enplanements a year, law enforcement officials (LEO) are not required to be present for passenger boarding if they can guarantee a response time of 15 minutes or less. The Humboldt County Sheriff's Department, as the lead LEO agency, cannot guarantee the required response time even though a supervising Sergeant oversees the Humboldt County Animal Shelter located on the airport property less than five minutes away. Thus the Aviation Division is mandated to provide security services for CRCHCA. The airport is only mandated to have a security presence when the TSA checkpoint is open for boarding until 30 minutes after plane departure. The Sheriff's Department utilizes retired annuitants for security. Their office is house

at the aforementioned Humboldt County Animal Shelter. There are two shifts: 4:30 a.m.-noon and noon-8:00 p.m. It costs the Aviation Division \$32 per hour to provide security services through the Sheriff's Department. TSA only reimburses \$20 per hour. The Aviation Division is subsidizing the difference at a cost of approximately \$85,000 for fiscal year 2014-15.

Murray Field: Murray Field is a 131 acre airfield constructed on filled land at 7' above mean sea level. It is surrounded by dykes and fencing that prohibits wildlife from entering the runway and field area. The airfield provides the only aircraft repair facility in Humboldt County that is serviced by a certified mechanic. Also on the site are the following: a café, Civil Air Patrol Office, flight instructions, medical air flights and a FedEx Express stop for package delivery. There are three large hangars that include space for 56 aircraft. The hangar rent fees range from \$105 to \$250 per month depending on the size of the space. At the time of the visit, all hangars were rented, although some tenants were in arrears with their payments. Fees for planes that tie-down outside for short periods of time vary depending upon the size and weight of the aircraft.

Grass and weeds have begun to grow through the asphalt on the tie-down areas and the taxi-way. This can be resolved with a weed-killer. However, to perform any tasks involving pesticides, a county worker must have a California State Qualified Applicator certification. The position assigned to weed control was frozen in the 2014-15 Aviation Division budget. Presently, a Public Works employee is studying to earn the aforementioned certification. It should be noted that the airfield is situated within the Coastal Zone and only certain types of chemicals can be used because of the proximity to Humboldt Bay.

The airport landing beacon that is currently in use is a replacement for a previously broken beacon. It is a used beacon without the ability to be properly adjusted to the correct angle. At the current angle, it is a safety issue for pilots as the beacon can shine in their eyes while attempting to land at night. Also, it shines into windows of homes that are located to the southwest of the airport. A piece of plywood was attached to the beacon as a temporary fix to block its southwest beam. Public Works is aware of the problem via complaints from pilots and homeowners, but to date the beacon has not been replaced.

An inspection by Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics, was completed in November, 2014. In the inspection notification letter, the following observed issues needed to be addressed:

- Three trees approximately 25-30 feet in height and bushes located northeast of the runway must be removed;
- Pavement on the runway, taxiways, and ramps were beginning to ravel and need to be evaluated for preventative maintenance to curb further deterioration;
- Two runway edge lights were not functioning and must be restored to provide optimum runway visibility at night and during periods of reduced visibility.

Garberville Airport: Garberville Airport is used by general aviators who commute to more urban areas. It is one of the bases used extensively by California Department of Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) during fire season. There is storage for 21 planes, a fuel station, three large metal storage buildings, two long open air hangars used for plane and miscellaneous storage. One of the open-air hangars needs to have some roof repairs. There are three open plane tie-downs. Several of the tenants are in arrears on their hangar rent and have been referred to Humboldt County Revenue Recovery. The fuel station sells gas at a higher per gallon price than airports outside the county. Lesser use from higher prices results in the degradation of the gas. Cracks and broken asphalt were noted on the runway and the French drain system needs to be updated for efficiency purposes along the sides of the runway.

An inspection of the airport by Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics was completed in May, 2014. In the inspection notification letter, the following observed issues needed to be addressed:

- The runway holding position markings are faded and must be remarked.
- Several trees penetrate the approach surface and must be removed or topped to enhance operational safety.
- Taxiway and runway asphalt is failing and must be addressed in the near future to prevent further deterioration and to enhance operational safety.
- Several trees paralleling the east side of the runway must be removed or topped to enhance operational safety.
- Weeds must be removed from the runway and the runway safety area (RSA).

The runway was measured at approximately 2,790' in length, which agrees with the 2,783' shown on the 2010 ALP (Airport Landing Pattern). However, the 5010 (Airport Master Record) indicates the length is 3,050' and the State Permit shows a length of 2,850'. The 5010 and State Permit appear incorrect. The inspection notification letter requested that this critical information be corrected with the FAA for operational safety.

Rohnerville Airport: Rohnerville Airport is located just south of Fortuna. On the day of the Humboldt County Grand Jury inspection, there were 22 airplanes on site. The airport is used by many local general aviation pilots, as well as, CAL FIRE during fire season. There are outbuildings and offices for CAL FIRE on the property. There is a single runway and taxiway that is due for an improvement project when funds are available from the FAA.

A portion of the airport is used by the Sheriff's Work Alternative Program (SWAP) as a county farm to provide food for inmates. In exchange for rent, SWAP workers are responsible for mowing the grass and maintaining the landscaping at the airport. There is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Public Works and the Sheriff's Department delineating the responsibilities of each party.

An inspection by Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics was completed in May, 2014. In the inspection notification letter, the following observed issues needed to be addressed:

- The taxiway and runway asphalt was cracking and needs to be repaired.
- Trees need to be topped at the end of the runway to prevent problems with the heavily loaded fire fighting airplanes.

Kneeland Airport: Kneeland Airport is located at an elevation of about 2,700 feet above sea level and provides a landing strip above the fog line for general aviation. The airport is used as a Helitack Base for CAL FIRE equipment and also provides fire personnel a lookout point to observe smoke during fire season. It is completely fenced with a locked gate.

An inspection by the California Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics, was completed in May, 2014. In the inspection notification letter, the following observed issues needed to be addressed:

- There is not adequate RSA length beyond either end of the runway.
- Several trees located northwest of the approach end of the runway and numerous trees located both west and east of the runway must be removed or topped to enhance operational safety.

Dinsmore Airport: Dinsmore Airport is a single runway airport located in a valley about 82 miles SE of Eureka. It is situated on 23 acres with a 2,510' runway that parallels Highway 36. It lacks landing beacons which restricts any night time landings. An older fence surrounds the site and portions of it are deteriorating and falling down. A wooden storage building is the only structure located on the site. There is one aircraft and one ultra-light permanently based at the airfield. The airport is used by CAL FIRE during the fire season and by mercy air flights as needed, which was noted to be about two to three times a week. The turnaround area on the east side of the strip has weeds, grass, and cracks in the asphalt but the runway appeared to have been recently repaired.

- An inspection by Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics was completed in January, 2015. In the inspection notification letter, the following two repeat discrepancies were noted which must be remedied by 7/1/2015 to avoid suspension of their state airport permit:
- Trees located approximately 350' southeast and about 1,800' east of the runway and numerous trees located south of the runway must be removed or topped to enhance operational safety and to meet airport design obstruction standards.
- Form 5010-1 indicates that the runway is 2,510' in length; however, Caltrans measured the runway to be approximately 2,350'. The runway markings must be corrected.

The Humboldt County Grand Jury could not find evidence, through observations or interviews, that issues identified in the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics' inspection notification letters have been addressed at any of the five general aviation airports. Also, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (BOS) has an airport advisory committee to advise the BOS regarding aviation matters within the county. During our review of the airports, it was discovered that Public Works does not share the annual inspection letters with the committee.

FINDINGS

- F1. Grass and weeds have begun to grow through the asphalt on the following airfields: Murray Field, Garberville Airport and Rohnerville Airport.
- F2. Trees need to be topped or removed for operational safety at the following airfields: Murray Field, Garberville Airport, Rohnerville Airport, Kneeland Airport and Dinsmore Airport.
- F3. Pavement is beginning to ravel and needs to be repaired at the following airfields: Murray Field, Garberville Airport and Rohnerville Airport.
- F4. Some tenants are in arrears with their hangar rents at Murray Field and the Garberville Airport.
- F5. The replacement airport landing beacon at Murray Field does not have the capability to be adjusted to the correct angle for operational safety.
- F6. Two runway edge lights are not functioning at Murray Field.
- F7. An open-air hangar roof at Garberville Airport needs to be repaired.
- F8. Runway holding position markings are faded and must be remarked at Garberville Airport.
- F9. Kneeland Airport does not have adequate runway safety area lengths beyond either runway end. The airport is currently permitted to have inadequate lengths by the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics.
- F10. The Dinsmore Airport runway does not match the length as reported on Form 5010-1. It was reported as 2,510' but was measured as 2,350'. This discrepancy must be corrected by July 1, 2015 to avoid suspension of its state airport permit.
- F11. The BOS has an airport advisory committee to advise them on matters regarding aviation in the county. Public Works does not share the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics' annual inspection notification letters with the committee.
- F12. The Grand Jury could not identify a lead person with direct BOS authority to negotiate with an additional airline for BOS approval.

- F13. There is a duplication of services between Public Works' Aviation and General Services Divisions in certain areas.
- F14. The Aviation Division's overall fund balance has been in the red since the FY 2009-10.
- F15. The Aviation Division is subsidizing a security cost difference of \$85,000 at CRCHCA for FY 2014-15.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works remove grass and weeds from runways and repair cracks, as needed at: Murray Field, Garberville Airport and Rohnerville Airport. (F1)
- R2. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works remove or top trees to enhance operational safety at: Murray Field, Garberville Airport, Rohnerville Airport, Kneeland Airport and Dinsmore Airport. (F2)
- R3. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works repair the raveling pavement, as needed at: Murray Field, Garberville Airport and Rohnerville Airport. (F3)
- R4. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works verify rent income and institute a plan for revenue recovery with those tenants who are in arrears with hangar rent payments at Murray Field and Garberville Airport. (F4)
- R5. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works replace the Murray Field landing beacon and adjust it to the correct angle to enhance operational safety. (F5)
- R6. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works repair the Murray Field non-functioning runway edge lights to enhance operational safety. (F6)
- R7. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works repair the Garberville Airport open-air hangar roof. (F7)
- R8. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works repaint the Garberville Airport runway holding position markings to enhance operational safety. (F8)
- R9. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works consider ways to bring the Kneeland Airport runway safety area lengths up to current standards. (F9)
- R10. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that Public Works complete a Corrected Airport Permit Application for Dinsmore Airport indicating the correct runway length before July 1, 2015 to avoid suspension of its state airport permit. (F10)

- R11. The Humboldt Grand Jury recommends that Public Works share Caltrans Division of Aeronautics' annual inspection notification letters with the Humboldt County Airport Advisory Committee. (F11)
- R12. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors (BOS) direct the Humboldt County Airport Advisory Committee to recommend alternatives to the BOS for realignment of the Aviation Division outside of the Humboldt County Department of Public Works. (F11) (F14)
- R13. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that the BOS assign one person with the authority to negotiate a deal for additional airline services and grant the designee a direct line of communication to the BOS. (F12).
- R14. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that the BOS direct the County Administrative Officer (CAO) to perform an audit of the internal procedures between the Public Works' Aviation Division and General Services Division to eliminate any duplication of services. (F13) (F14)
- R15. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends that the Public Works' Aviation Division and the Sheriff's Department meet to strategize ways to reduce the cost differential for security services at CRCHCA. (F14) (F15)

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the grand jury requests responses as follows:

From the following individuals:

Director, Humboldt County Public Works Department R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, R14, R15

Humboldt County Sheriff R15

County Administrative Officer R14

From the following governing bodies:

Humboldt County Board of Supervisors R12, R13, R14

INVITED RESPONSES

Humboldt County Airport Advisory Committee R11, R12

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Federal Aviation Administration, Calendar Year 2007 Passenger Boarding and All-Cargo Data.

Federal Aviation Administration, Calendar Year 2013 Passenger Boarding and All-Cargo Data.

Humboldt County Public Works Budget for 2014-2015.

2014 Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics Inspection Letters for Humboldt County general aviation airports.