

FAA facing backlash over noise issues created by PBN flight paths

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FAA administrator Michael Huerta addresses ATCA Conference and Exposition in National Harbor, Maryland.
Air Traffic Control Association (ATCA) Conference/Twitter

FAA is contending with a backlash from some communities around airports where Performance Based Navigation (PBN) procedures have inadvertently created concentrated areas of increased aircraft noise.

"We've gotten a few calls and letters," FAA administrator [Michael Huerta](#) said at the Air Traffic Control Association (ATCA) Conference and Exposition in National Harbor, Maryland. "PBN has certainly made flights more efficient. More precise navigation paths have an effect of shrinking the [overall] noise footprint of aircraft, but it does have the effect of concentrating the noise over a smaller area under the flight path."

The agency is seeking to avoid contentious legal battles over airport noise issues created by PBN flight paths.

PBN is a key plank of [FAA's NextGen air traffic control](#) (ATC) modernization program. FAA Air Traffic Organization COO Teri Bristol, also a speaker at the ATCA conference, said PBN procedures have been approved or are in the process of being approved for 11 US metroplexes—regions around cities with one or more major airports and high levels of air traffic. The satellite-based navigation procedures allow for more direct descents into airports and are credited with saving fuel and reducing emissions.

But Huerta said FAA is willing to consider flight path adjustments to mitigate noise concerns, and will be more cognizant of potential noise issues when designing PBN procedures in the future. "We can try to place flight routes over less populated areas when possible and have [even] steeper descents," he said, adding that he is willing to settle for an "80% solution" regarding metroplex flight path redesigns.

"If we can get an 80% improvement in flight operations efficiency, I will happily take it over a 100% gain if it means avoiding years of litigation [over noise]," he said.

FAA signed a memorandum of understanding with the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport) earlier this month "to develop test projects designed to help address the concentration of noise that some residents face because of adjustments to aircraft flight procedures," according to FAA.

FAA noted that PBN procedures at Boston Logan International Airport have "generated community concerns about persistent noise in specific locations." According to FAA, "Massport has proposed several ideas for a test program with the FAA to better understand the implications of the flight concentrations and to study possible strategies to address the neighborhood concerns. After an initial review, the FAA has agreed that the ideas merit further study."

Huerta said FAA is increasing its public engagement efforts. This month, the agency named Julie Marks to the newly created position of community involvement manager-airspace projects. She previously was FAA's environmental policy and operations manager. Huerta said Marks is "passionate" about both preserving the benefits of NextGen improvements and addressing community concerns.

"Truly engaging with the community is more of an art than a science, and we need to engage more upfront," Huerta conceded.