

SFO Will Require Jets to Fly Higher to Reduce Noise / Airport OKs rules after years of complaints

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2000-04-26 04:00:00 PDT Regional -- After years of complaints from mid-Peninsula residents, [San Francisco International Airport](#) officials have agreed to raise jet altitude requirements in an effort to reduce flight noise over their neighborhoods.

The new policy requires pilots coming into the airport to fly at least 5,000 feet above the "Menlo Park interchange" -- the airspace directly above the Menlo Park-Palo Alto border, said airport spokesman [Ron Wilson](#). The previous guideline called for 4,000 feet.

The increase, which has been approved by the [Federal Aviation Administration](#), will affect about 70 flights a day coming into the airport from Southern California, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Hawaii and over [Point Reyes Station](#) in Marin County, Wilson said.

U.S. Rep. [Anna Eshoo](#), D-Palo Alto, is scheduled to announce the change today at a 10:30 a.m. press conference in the Palo Alto City Hall Plaza.

Increasing noise from jet planes has long been a bone of contention for residents throughout the Bay Area, even in communities as far removed from runways as rural Point Reyes Station. Some East Bay residents have complained of problems from both Oakland and San Francisco airports, while some San Jose residents have expressed concern about the growth in air traffic from that city's main airport.

Along the Peninsula, several mayors asked airport management nearly a year ago to adopt a series of controls to reduce the noise. Although supported by Menlo Park officials, Palo Alto and Los Altos leaders had been frustrated in their attempts to have a say in airport matters because the two Santa Clara County cities were denied general admission to the Airport/[Community Roundtable](#).

Delegates from 17 San Mateo County cities, including Menlo Park, and representatives from the airport, the FAA, airlines and pilots' unions have membership in the 19-year-old advisory group, which tackles several airport-related issues.

In addition to noise reductions, the mayors' plan calls for guidelines to ensure that new flights or larger aircraft do not exceed a designated noise level over Peninsula cities, and penalties for noncompliance.

"We're very encouraged by this latest development," said [Gary Fazzino](#), former Palo Alto mayor and currently a city council member. "Ten years ago, this was not a problem. But the fact is we've experienced a real increase in complaints about SFO-bound airplane noise over the past four to five years."

Noting that the mid-Peninsula is an "urban area," Fazzino added, "There is no question that we all have to live with ambient noise. What we're trying to do is control it, bring it down to an acceptable level."

Federal law requires airports to keep noise levels under 65 decibels, about the level of a normal conversation. On most days, the average noise level rises well above 65 decibels throughout several communities near the airport, including Burlingame and Millbrae.

While noise levels in mid-Peninsula communities rarely break that threshold, the latest change nevertheless will decrease noise in the area by about 41 percent, Wilson said.

In 1997, planes flying over southern San Mateo County into the airport in the early morning were bumped from 6,000 to 7,000 feet. But the latest altitude adjustment may be the last of its kind in the Bay Area.

"There's other things we can do to lessen noise," Wilson said. The airport cannot raise altitude levels too high, he noted, "otherwise (pilots) will be dive bombing into the airport."

Airport officials envision new runways stretching into the bay as one way to cut down on noise, end chronic weather-related delays, accommodate a new generation of larger jets and improve safety for surrounding neighborhoods.

But a number of environmental groups have expressed concern, saying extending the runways over the water would actually increase noise, and harm wildlife and water quality.

An Alameda-based citizens organization Monday issued a report arguing, among other points, that the airport's \$2.5 billion runway expansion actually would increase noise in the East Bay. The group says the proposed runway is unnecessary because of recent advances in air traffic control technology, including a \$12 billion Global Satellite Positioning System developed by the U.S. [Department of Defense](#).

Although Wilson had not seen the report yet, he said airport officials are "in the process of evaluating the environmental effects of the runway reconfiguration, which includes noise."

The Alameda-based group, the Citizens' League for [Airport Safety](#) and Serenity, "may be jumping the gun on this," Wilson said, since the evaluation "may well prove that the new system will create less noise."

The airport is expected to pick the winning design out of five finalists for the runway reconfiguration in September.