

Los Angeles



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From the Los Angeles Times

## L.A. airport agency gets poor marks for emergency response

An audit finds security coordination lacking between agencies. It also finds that efforts to regionalize air travel are hampered by a lack of political will.

By Dan Weikel

December 17, 2008

Despite significant improvements over the last decade, facilities managed by Los Angeles World Airports continue to struggle with emergency response, regional coordination and the financial solvency of Van Nuys Airport, according to an audit released Tuesday.

At the same time, the city's airport department -- which operates Los Angeles International Airport, Ontario International Airport, Palmdale Regional Airport as well as Van Nuys -- got good marks from KH Consulting Group in Los Angeles for implementing most of the recommendations it made nine years ago.

But more work is needed in some key areas, auditors said.

\* The city's airports still lack a plan to coordinate law enforcement, airport operations, airlines and federal security agencies in an emergency, despite the improvement and expansion of police services since 9/11. LAX has been ranked by the state as the No. 1 potential target for terrorists in California.

"If there was a major incident out there, a wide range of city employees who work at the airport would not know what to do. The majority of them, they are not trained, and there is no well-formulated plan in place. There is work to be done," said Los Angeles City Controller Laura Chick, whose office released the KH Consulting Group study.

\* Emergency operations centers and back-up systems should be installed at LAX, Ontario and Van Nuys because the current police dispatching system does not meet federal guidelines.

\* Regional airport planning "remains moribund" because there are no incentives to place regional needs ahead of local community interests.

\* Van Nuys Airport, which fails to make money year after year despite being one of the busiest general aviation airports in the world, should impose landing fees and consider contracting out the management of the airport to a private company.

The wide-ranging, 525-page audit, which cost almost \$700,000, looked at 25 major airports for comparison purposes and surveyed thousands of LAWA employees, elected officials, stakeholders and citizens interested in local airports.

Gina Marie Lindsey, head of LAWA, called the audit a "constructive process."

"It recognizes that we need to fix LAX so we can compete in the global marketplace and that we must move traffic to other airports so they can grow," she said. "Those immediate and central activities are imperative."

Lindsey, however, disagreed with the audit's assessment of LAWA's emergency preparedness, saying an effective plan was already in place. LAWA is evaluating proposals to consolidate operations at LAX, she said, acknowledging that communications and coordination need to be improved.

Some of the audit's toughest criticism was leveled at Van Nuys Airport, which receives millions of dollars in subsidies annually from LAWA. In 2007, the airport handled almost 400,000 landings and takeoffs.

Lindsey said the Van Nuys subsidy grew to about \$9 million this year. When the airport is compared to Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, the auditors found that Teterboro had a third less traffic and a third more revenue.

"Van Nuys Airport has not received the attention it deserves from LAWA for decades," said Chick, whose agency also has audited operations at Van Nuys. "It has not been run in a way that benefits the city. It has been run in a shoddy way, with out-of-date contracts and missed opportunities to make a profit."

On a broader scale, auditors said efforts to regionalize air travel have been hampered by a lack of political will and the continued focus on LAX because of its size and importance to the local economy. Plans to regionalize air travel call for spreading the growth in passengers from busy LAX to smaller regional airports.

The audit concludes that no government agency has taken charge of the effort, even though many citizens, elected officials and community leaders support the policy. In the meantime, airports in Burbank, Long Beach and Orange County as well as LAX have reached agreements with nearby residents limiting passenger volumes or aircraft operations, which could frustrate future efforts to add flights, auditors said. Auditors predict that the lack of a strong regionalization policy could result in serious economic consequences for L.A. and Southern California if significant passenger or freight traffic were diverted to other West Coast gateways, such as San Francisco or Seattle.

Lindsey said LAWA remains committed to the policy and recently assigned someone to take responsibility for its efforts. She noted that it had been difficult to get consensus on the board of the now-disbanded Southern California Regional Airport Authority.

"Everyone says they want to cooperate, but then they all want to off-load their air traffic to someone else rather than absorb it," Lindsey said.

The audit also emphasized numerous successes, including progress toward the long-awaited modernization of LAX, with new gates at the Tom Bradley International Terminal to accommodate the next generation of large commercial aircraft like the Airbus A380.

In addition, auditors credited LAWA officials for environmental initiatives such as an ongoing study of airport-related pollution, an alternative fuels program for cars and trucks and the removal of hazardous materials from LAX grounds.

They also said that significant strides had been made to consider input from neighborhoods and community groups near the airports, although auditors said the efforts must be strengthened to overcome a traditional distrust of the agency by local residents.

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