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Juneau airport to join technology revolution**COMPASS: Other points of view**

By MARION C. BLAKEY

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For a city that's accessible only by sea and air, Juneau has an airport that is famously critical but often challenging. Now something is about to occur that will make it much more "approachable."

For years, air traffic into Alaska's capital was hampered by a lack of radar. In January, Juneau International Airport turned on something called wide area multilateration. WAM is a system that monitors aircraft in flight using signals from aircraft to three or more ground station receivers. Now more traffic information is available to both pilots and controllers, allowing for more efficient and safer traffic management.

This is no small change for Juneau's airport, which experiences a dramatic seasonal swing in air traffic, ranging from approximately 170 takeoffs and landings daily during the winter to up to 600 during the summer. And three of every four aircraft are air taxis or other nonscheduled flights.

But this improvement will pale by comparison at the end of this month when ADS-B is turned on in Juneau. In fact, the technological leap will be something like going from no phones to cell phones -- and skipping over land lines entirely.

ADS-B, or Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast, is a revolutionary technology and a cornerstone of the national Next Generation Air Transportation System -- NextGen. Once ADS-B is operational, ground controllers will be able to use the satellite-based GPS system to monitor and separate aircraft in Juneau airspace. There are immediate benefits: Controllers will have more accurate information, while air traffic and weather information will be up-linked directly to the cockpit of properly equipped aircraft.

For Juneau, it means more efficient landings and takeoffs since less space will be required between aircraft.

Yet this is just the beginning of what will be achieved when NextGen is fully implemented across the country. But making this happen as quickly as it should takes money and political will -- both of which seem to be in short supply.

Along the very routes where bonfires once burned and high-powered beacons flashed to guide pilots, aircraft today are monitored by radar systems, vectored by air traffic controllers and directed by signals emitted from ground-based radio navigation aids. The end result is that while planes fly higher and faster in all kinds of weather, they still follow the same ground tracks that trailblazers such as Charles Lindbergh, one of the early U.S. Army airmail pilots, pioneered more than 80 years ago.

NextGen incorporates more than two dozen projects that will transform the air traffic control system in the United States by 2025. It replaces today's radar-based system, which relies on extensive voice communications between controllers and pilots, with a GPS satellite-based system.

The fact is the technology is already available. The ground infrastructure will be in place by 2013. But the schedule for getting airplanes equipped drags on for another seven years or more. Why wait? In addition to the creation of more than 150,000 new jobs, studies show that the public benefits from a federally funded, NextGen-equipped civil fleet are huge through dramatically reduced CO2 emissions, shortened travel time and reduced delays.

The \$1.14 billion in the president's 2011 FAA budget request for NextGen programs is enough to keep the FAA on its current 2025 implementation schedule but it is not enough to accelerate the program. We get a faster return on our investment the faster we invest in the infrastructure for NextGen.

The FAA is laying a great foundation in Juneau, one that has been four years in the planning.

So let's celebrate the hard work and planning that will flip the switch on Juneau's ADS-B. And recognize it's just a start. We need leadership and money and political will to create the national NextGen system America deserves.

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