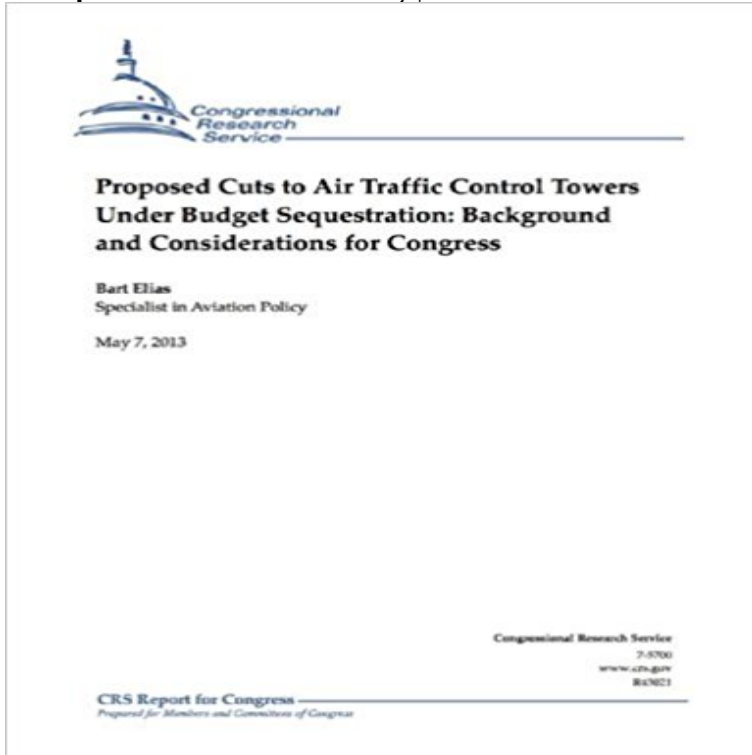


Proposed Cuts to Air Traffic Control Towers Under Budget Sequestration: Background and Considerations for Congress



On March 22, 2013, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced it would close 149 air traffic control towers operated by contract firms. Originally scheduled for April 2013, FAA has delayed the closures until June 15, 2013. FAA took this action as a budget reduction measure under the sequestration cuts called for in the Budget Control Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-25) subsequent to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reductions failure to reach a deficit reduction agreement by March 1, 2013. FAA may close additional towers staffed with FAA controllers during FY2013 pending negotiations with FAA labor unions regarding the manner in which sequestration cuts will be implemented. FAA also named 72 air traffic control facilities that may close late at night as it seeks to meet a statutorily imposed reduction of 5.3% in spending for air traffic operations. Prior to the cuts, roughly 10% of U.S. airports had operating control towers, although many towers close at night when flight activity is low. Closure of a tower does not mean closure of an airport: At airports where no tower is operating, pilots use established traffic patterns and procedures to avoid other aircraft. The towers slated for closure have no radar approach control capabilities and perform air traffic separation functions using procedures for visual flight. These airports can handle aircraft in poor weather on a limited basis, but unlike airports with radar approach control they cannot handle multiple aircraft on approach in low visibility and clouds. About half of the roughly 500 towers in the United States are operated by private firms under contract to FAA. Sixteen of the contract towers are partially funded through local (non-federal) shares of up to 20%, while 235, including the 149 identified for closure, have been fully funded by FAA. The cost-share towers are currently partially funded through a separate federal appropriation

that is subject to the 5.3% sequester cut, but will not be closed in FY2013. FAA has indicated plans to close the cost-share towers in FY2014. A tower scheduled to close could be converted to a non-federal tower if a local community were willing to fully fund the towers operation. Non-federal towers are still regulated, but not funded, by FAA. FAA has historically relied on a benefit-to-cost ratio methodology for establishing and discontinuing air traffic control tower operations. This methodology quantifies the safety and efficiency benefits of a tower in reducing aircraft collisions and other accidents and reducing flight times, and identifies established towers for possible closure or conversion to cost-share or non-federal towers if their benefit-to-cost ratio falls below one. However, all towers identified for closure under the sequestration cuts have benefit-to-cost ratios greater than one. Long-term tower closures would have relatively small but measureable impacts on safety and efficiency, and could cause a shift in both commercial and general aviation traffic to busier airports where towers remain open, depending on how airlines and other aircraft operators respond. Legislation to maintain federal control tower funding and a measure to increase tower staffing at busy airports are under consideration in the 113th Congress. S. 687 would prohibit the closure of any air traffic control tower in FY2013 and FY2014. S.Amdt. 45 had sought to maintain funding for the FAA contract towers to prevent their closure, but was not considered on the floor in the Senate. H.R. 66, pending in the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, would increase staffing minimums for towers at busier commercial airports, which could put additional fiscal pressures on FAA to close low-activity towers or reduce their operating hours.

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