



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Operations Supervisor Sharon Reeder says the airport may see as many as 200,000 takeoffs and landings this year.

Airport gets a weather station

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WATSONVILLE — This city's airport will soon be home to a \$250,000 state-of-the-art weather station, courtesy of the federal government.

The 24-hour station will transmit updated weather reports to pilots, Watsonville Airport staff, and other interested parties at one-minute intervals.

The T-shaped complex of gauges, sensors, meters and a laser beam will be the county's first

computerized National Weather Service station. Currently, the service relies on "cooperative observers" — also known as human weather-watchers — who provide high and low temperature readings, rainfall counts and other climatic information.

When it goes on line in early June, the station is expected to make the airport — which currently uses National Weather Service reports from Salinas and Monterey and visual weather information gleaned from the sky

by airport staff — a safer and easier place to fly an airplane, said Sharon Reeder, the airport's operations supervisor.

"Any kind of help that you can get in knowing the condition of the sky at your destination allows you to plan better," she said.

More than 180,000 landings and departures were logged at the airport in 1990. Airport staff is conducting a new use study, and Reeder said current traffic may be as high as 200,000 takeoffs and landings a year.

Bill Cleverdon, owner of United Flight Services flight school and a Watsonville pilot for 20 years, said the new station will be "quite an improvement" over the current system.

Weather reports from Salinas and Monterey don't always accurately reflect conditions in the Pajaro Valley, he said. And out-of-town pilots sometimes lack important weather information, especially after-hours when the

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port staff and sage local pilots have gone home for the day.

"It's a safety factor," said Cleverdon.

Low-lying fog is the most common weather problem for pilots taking off or landing at Watsonville, said Reeder. Landings at the airport are prohibited there when the cloud "ceiling" is 680 feet or lower; pilots may still take off in fog by using instruments and air-traffic data.

The new weather station will give pilots a better idea of cloud cover before they make flight plans, and more time to plan a landing at an alternative airport if the ceiling is too low, said Reeder.

The tracking station will measure wind direction and speed, air temperature, precipitation, cloud cover up to 12,000 feet and other weather conditions. A digitalized computer voice will provide constantly updated reports that can be accessed by aircraft radio systems and a telephone number to be published at a later date.

The system is likely to be a valuable source of weather information for the community in

general, especially during intense storms and disasters, said Reeder.

Watsonville Airport is one of 1,300 airports in the nation to be fitted with the station, part of a cooperative effort by the U.S. departments of Commerce, Transportation and Defense, and the National Weather Service, the Federal Aviation Administration and the U.S. Navy.

Duane Dykema, meteorologist for the National Weather Service in San Francisco, said the monitor is part of a national weather-station expansion and modernization program targeting "selected areas throughout the country ... places where significant weather may occur."

The only cost to the city will be the price of electricity to keep the station running, between \$150-\$250 a month.

Work has begun on a concrete pad on the Buena Vista side of the airport that will support the station; the high-tech equipment is expected to be installed May 27-28, just in time for the 29th annual West Coast Antique Fly-In and Air Show at Watsonville Airport May 28-30.