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FAA Selects Miramar for Radar Center : Air Traffic: Four Southern California control points that are part of a nationwide network will be consolidated into one.

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TIMES STAFF WRITERS

In what they described as an effort to make the Southern California skies safer, federal aviation officials announced Monday that they will use Miramar Naval Air Station as a radar approach center for air traffic control, consolidating facilities at Los Angeles, Burbank, Ontario and El Toro.

The new 100,000-square-foot center, which will be built on Navy land, will orchestrate air traffic in a 30,000-square-mile area from Ontario to Santa Catalina Island and Burbank to Oceanside. It will monitor about 2 million flights annually, at altitudes to 13,000 feet.

San Diego's existing Terminal Radar Approach Control, or Tracon, at Miramar will remain separate, although it may be combined with the proposed Southern California facility after 1995, said Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman Elly Brekke.

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“You now have four facilities that separately control air space in the L.A. Basin; now we’re going to have one facility. When you manage a single facility, you have much better control, and that will enhance safety,” said Jerry Chavkin, the FAA Western-Pacific regional administrator.

The Tracon network provides overlapping radar coverage for the entire nation.

The Tracon planned for Miramar, with an estimated cost of \$114 million and scheduled to open in 1993, will use a new telecommunications system as well as equipment from the other four facilities, Chavkin said. There will be no immediate increase in the number of traffic controllers, he said.

Under the current system, a pilot might be in touch with several different Tracons as he approaches the air space of one airport in the Los Angeles Basin. At the airport in

Torrance, half the air space is controlled by the Los Angeles Tracon, while the other half is controlled by the Coast Tracon, Chavkin said. With the new system, the pilot will speak only with the Southern Californian Tracon at Miramar.

The National Transportation Safety Board, some pilots and air traffic controllers have criticized the FAA for inadequate controller staffing and poor equipment in Southern California Tracons. Several say these conditions have contributed to several near-misses, such as the one that occurred Feb. 13 when a British Airways Boeing 747 with 286 passengers aboard came within 2 miles of an American Airlines jet with 70 people aboard that was flying to Ontario at the same altitude. FAA rules require 3 miles of horizontal separation.

“It seems foolhardy that they would go build a new installation and not stock it with more staffers and top-quality equipment,” said Richard D. Russell, a pilot and the regional air safety coordinator with the Airline Pilots Assn. in Los Angeles. “Unless they can staff it with an adequate number of controllers, they’re not going to be able to handle the traffic. They certainly cannot handle it right now.”

Southern California skies are among the most congested in the United States. Orange County has 12,200 licensed commercial and general aviation pilots; Los Angeles County has 27,000. In 1988 there were 533,484 takeoffs and landings at John Wayne Airport in Orange County and 623,519 at Los Angeles International.

Chavkin of the FAA says he is confident that the existing facilities can handle the air traffic with their equipment and that they will continue to do so until the San Diego center is opened. “It’s going to be very satisfactory until this facility is built,” he said.

The Miramar facility may get all new equipment by the late 1990s, Chavkin said.

The San Diego site was selected after a one-year search that included soliciting proposals from 21 airports and military bases in Southern California. It was chosen after

officials analyzed a number of factors, such as quality of life for employees, terrain, cost and available services. The new facility will have its own access and not use the military entrance, said Brekke, the FAA spokeswoman.

Los Angeles Tracon employees will be among the first to move to the new facility, which eventually will house about 400 air traffic controllers, technicians and other personnel, she said.

The facility will be similar to one established in New York, which monitors aircraft approaching several airports. Last year, the FAA conducted a study that recommended setting up the same kind of consolidated approach in Southern California.

At Miramar, the reaction to the new facility was muted. “No agreement has been made,” said Chief Petty Officer Bobbie Carlton, a spokeswoman. “The next step is for them to come to Miramar with a shopping list of what they would like to do. We don’t know exactly what they want.”

In Orange County, controllers and pilots were generally receptive to the consolidation plan.

Mike Desrosiers, 31, a Coast Tracon controller for the past eight years, said there will be more modern equipment and newer facilities than what he and about 60 other controllers have had at the Coast facility in El Toro.

“The building we’re in now doesn’t even meet earthquake standards,” Desrosiers said Monday.

He said he also likes the idea of working in San Diego County, where housing is generally more affordable than in Orange County. In fact, he said, he plans to move to San Diego County as soon as possible. He now lives in Moreno Valley near Riverside and commutes 112 miles round trip to work in El Toro.



Of the three sites under final consideration for the consolidated facility, Desrosiers said, he and other controllers at Coast Tracon favored San Diego. The other two were Santa Maria and French Valley, near Temecula.

Desrosiers said that working in one big radar facility will have no effect on the way controllers work the various airspace sectors throughout the Southland. He said he and the other Coast controllers will continue to work Coast airspace, which includes most of Orange County and parts of Los Angeles and San Diego counties.

Jay Gassner, a flight instructor for Martin Aviation at John Wayne Airport, said it makes no difference to him where the controllers are as long as the airspace is covered.

“The important thing is to have the airspace covered and to have enough guys covering the (radar) screens,” Gassner said. “As far as being physically located in one place or another, I don’t think that’s the issue. You don’t have to have a person physically under the airspace so long as there is someone watching it.”

Gassner compared the consolidation plan for Southern California Tracons to one that has long been in effect for coverage of the nation’s high-altitude airspace. Controllers work out of one facility in Palmdale, for example, to cover airspace above 13,000 feet over all of Southern California and parts of Nevada and Arizona, he said.

Dan Welch, 49, a commercial-rated private from Fullerton, also said he sees no problem with the consolidation plan.

“What they see on the radar scope is going to be the same either way,” said Welch, who has been flying planes since 1972. “I don’t see that it makes a difference where they’re sitting. There’s more important issues, like the state of their equipment.”

Welch added that another, more pressing issue for pilots is the need for the FAA to simplify what he called an overly complex and confusing airspace system over Southern California. Private pilots, especially, he said, sometimes have difficulty determining when they have entered and exited controlled-airspace areas such as the one extending in a 30-mile radius around Los Angeles International Airport.

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