# Voluntary Revelations


**Air Traffic Safety Action Program reports boost the quantity and quality of NASA's ASRS database content.**

BY WAYNE ROSENKRANS

The Air Traffic Safety Action Program (ATSAP) in the United States has generated a far higher volume of voluntary safety reports from air traffic controllers[1] compared with this work group's historic reporting, new data show. Officials of the Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) say that the candor, details and other subjective attributes of ATSAP report quality also have improved significantly since ASRS began processing copies of these reports on Nov. 12, 2009.

Before ATSAP was launched, ASRS — the 36-year-old program funded by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and administered by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Ames Research Center — had been the only independent U.S. program to directly receive such reports from controllers.

Controller reports in 2010 and 2011 jumped from about 1 percent of the previous total annual ASRS intake of reports to about 10 percent, says Linda Connell, program director, NASA ASRS.

Direct intake of reports by ASRS from controllers about their errors, safety events and concerns now is much lower than in the past (Figure 1). "There is still some flow [of non-duplicative controller reports in 2012] that does not come through the ATSAP mechanism," Connell said. "We never know whether those controllers still are not aware of ATSAP, or they don't want to talk about a certain issue through that mechanism." Direct reports assure the information is still obtained, she added.

ATSAP operates under a relatively new model, labor agreement and FAA policy, with different rules for the confidential and non-punitive treatment of reports accepted, investigated and resolved by local event review committees (ERCs).

Under the ASRS model, NASA reads and triages all reports within three days (typically 1.14 days in 2012). If the report fits ASRS acceptance criteria, the controller who filed the report receives specified protections against FAA disciplinary action, except when events involve criminal activities or accidents.

"In our mission, we stay away from enforcement or corrective action or follow-up," Connell said. "To the best of our abilities, we provide information that is relevant for somebody else to look at and move forward. If we look at a pilot-initiated report and match it to an ATSAP report about the same event, we can ask, 'Why did this happen?' … with rich information to begin to untangle the answer. If people only work with 'stove-piped' information, they [risk making] decisions about the cause in isolation, in a vacuum."

From 2001 through 2011, ASRS intake included 25,293 direct-to-ASRS and ATSAP reports from controllers, she said. Of these, 17,216 (68 percent) were ATSAP reports — all received near the end of 2009, in 2010 and in 2011.

Over the 10-year period, the direct-to-ASRS reports totaled 8,077 (32 percent of all controller reports), with the lowest number, 56, in 2011 and the highest number, 1,689, in 2006. Following the transitional year of 2009, the annual total of ATSAP reports reached 8,474 in 2010. In 2011, the program received 7,826 ATSAP reports.

ASRS analysts assign "reported anomaly" types at the intake stage for both ATSAP and direct-to-ASRS reports, said Charles Drew, ASRS program manager for Booz Allen Hamilton, a NASA contractor. These categories are not mutually exclusive.

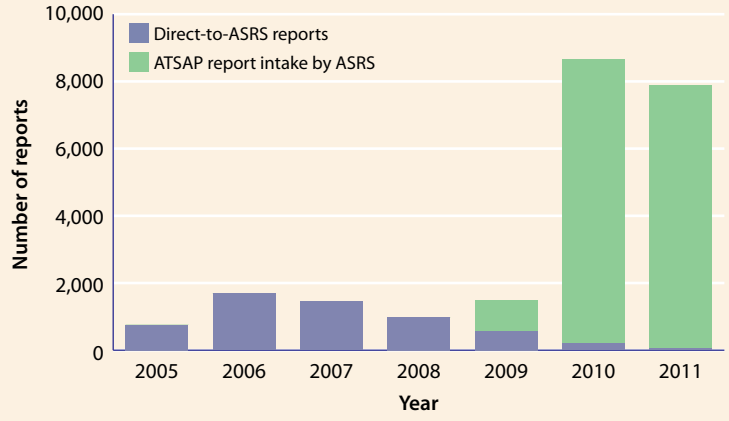
In 2011, the predominant categories — those to which more than 10 percent of reports were assigned — were "ATC issue–all types" (84.7 percent), "deviation–procedural/published material/policy" (62.2 percent), "airspace violation–all types" (20.5 percent), "deviation–procedural/clearance" (18.3 percent) and "conflict–airborne conflict" (14.6 percent).

ASRS keeps a subset of data, excluding the narrative, from every report received (219,092 in 2008–2011) in its internal screening dataset. Analysts then subjectively select a subset of all reports for the Full Form Database accessible online to the public (an estimated 22 percent were controller reports in 2008–2011, compared with 13 percent from all work groups).

*To read an enhanced version of this story, go to <flightsafety.org/aerosafety-world-magazine/march-2012/atsap-asrs>.*

1. This article refers only to *controllers* but the FAA's policy applies to "all ATO [Air Traffic Organization] personnel directly engaged in and/or supporting air traffic services and only to events that occur while acting in that capacity."

**FAA Controllers[1] Accelerate Voluntary Safety Reporting**




ASRS = Aviation Safety Reporting System; ATSAP = Air Traffic Safety Action Program; FAA = U.S. Federal Aviation Administration

**Note:**

1. The FAA policy on voluntary, non-punitive safety reports to ATSAP applies to "all ATO [Air Traffic Organization] personnel directly engaged in and/or supporting air traffic services and only to events that occur while acting in that capacity."

Source: Ames Research Center, U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration

**Figure 1**