

Skyguide plans the first virtual air traffic control centre

Geneva, 31 January 2014. The increase in efficiency of European air navigation services should be based so far, among other things, on the reduction in the number of air traffic control centres in Europe (there are currently more than 60). However, because of political and social opposition, such consolidations have been rarely addressed. Skyguide believes that the problem lies less in the number of centres and more in the poor networking between them. The Swiss air navigation services provider has itself been focusing for some time on a promising approach which involves the virtual consolidation of its two sites, Dübendorf and Geneva, to create one single air traffic control centre. The idea has aroused interest also in the international arena. Now skyguide is taking the next step towards creating its so-called “Virtual Centre Switzerland”.

The problems of physical consolidation

In Europe, the demand for more efficient air navigation services is widespread. However, there is a lack of feasible options to meet that demand. The physical consolidation of air traffic control centres, which would also include closures, has been so far one of the working hypotheses. Skyguide’s proposal in 2010 to create a centralised three-nation air traffic control centre in the Basel region gave rise to political and social opposition. As a result of technological developments, new alternatives have emerged over the last few years, including cooperation between different sites to create one joint virtual air traffic control centre.

New opportunities

Virtual air traffic control centres open up a range of new possibilities. The sites will be retained, the technical infrastructure, processes and organisations will be harmonised and the traffic load will be shared. In addition to a considerable improvement in the performance of air navigation services, most importantly this will lead to operational continuity, which is currently only possible to an unsatisfactory extent (for example, when a centre shuts down). The idea is beginning to gain in popularity both inside and outside Europe and skyguide’s Virtual Centre Switzerland is playing a prominent pioneering role.

Virtual Centre Switzerland

The next step towards the Virtual Centre Switzerland is just about to begin. During a transition phase starting in 2016 and covering several years, the entire upper airspace will be managed by one site when volumes of traffic are low. Because of its more extensive experience of an innovative “stripless” operating system, this role will be taken by Geneva. For the first time in Europe, one centre will occasionally be able to take over traffic from another. This transition phase has no effect on jobs and does not involve any changes to the service provided or the cooperation with customers and partners. If required (for example during the World Economic Forum), Dübendorf can at any time continue to take full responsibility for operations.

Of course, this transition phase does not bring the desired increase in efficiency yet, neither operationally nor economically. The full benefits of the Virtual Centre concept will make themselves felt only after the introduction of stripless operation throughout Switzerland and the technical harmonisation of the entire infrastructure. Then, both Dübendorf and Geneva will be able to take over different airspace sectors on a flexible basis. As CEO Daniel Weder explains: "We are creating one air traffic control centre with two sites. We are also considering possible cooperation with sites in other countries. This puts skyguide in a promising position in a European context, without the need to hand over the sovereign task of providing air navigation services."

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Skyguide is responsible for providing air navigation services in Switzerland and in certain parts of neighbouring countries. With its 1,400 employees active at 14 locations in Switzerland, skyguide safely and efficiently guides over 3,100 flights civil and military aircraft a day – or 1.1 million a year – through the busiest and most complex airspace in Europe. Skyguide stands for continuous improvement, focussed innovation and creative cooperation. Together with its partner organisations in Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, the company forms the FABEC alliance in charge of managing Central Europe's airspace. Skyguide is a non-profit limited company which has its head office in Geneva. The majority of its shares are held by the Swiss Confederation.
