

FAA chief says U.S. air safety not sacrificed by furloughs



WASHINGTON, April 24 (Reuters) - The head of the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration on Wednesday said that the agency could not find the kind of "sizeable" non-payroll budget cuts that would have avoided furloughing air traffic controllers, but added that passenger safety is not at risk despite lower staffing levels.

"We are focused on maintaining our core operational and safety responsibilities," FAA Administrator Michael Huerta told a House appropriations subcommittee hearing on the agency's 2014 budget request. "We will not do anything to compromise safety."

The FAA has said will furlough 47,000 employees for up to 11 days through the end of the fiscal year in September as part of its plan to meet \$637 million in required spending cuts. Nearly 13,000 of those employees are air traffic controllers.

"We have taken full advantage of the flexibilities we have" in terms of budget, but "we simply couldn't not get to" the \$637 million in cuts required under sequestration for fiscal 2013 without idling staff, he said.

Huerta was pressed by lawmakers on whether the FAA had asked for flexibility within its overall budget to preserve funds for air traffic operations as well as on why the agency was still paying overtime to employees.

"We have dramatically reduced all scheduled overtime and are preserving overtime to deal with emergency situations," he said.

Asked whether the White House's Office of Management and Budget had directed how the needed budget savings would be found, Huerta said the agency had "received no direction from OMB."

The FAA has had a hiring freeze since the start of the year, has canceled contracts with many contract and temporary employees and has cut back on staff travel and other costs, Huerta said.

"We have had big savings ... we simply could not get to the number," he said, noting repeatedly that 70 percent of FAA's operations budget is for salaries.

Air travelers in the United States have experienced long delays at some airports this week as the furloughs of air traffic controllers got under way. Early on Wednesday, Los Angeles International airport was experiencing 45-minute delays on some arriving planes that the FAA attributed to staffing.

Huerta also rejected a suggestion that the administration was using the furloughs and planned closures of control towers at some smaller airports to shift political blame to Republicans.

"That's not true," he said.