

All NATMAC Representatives

7 October 2010

NATMAC INFORMATIVE LETTER

Dear Gentlemen,

RATIONALISATION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM'S VOR INFRASTRUCTURE

In August 2009, a consultative letter was sent out regarding the NATS plans to progressively rationalise the UK's VOR infrastructure, reducing the number of beacons from the current 46 to 19. The plan has now been presented to DAP in more detail and this letter aims to summarise the results of last year's consultation and provide an update on the overall rationalisation plan.

The results of last year's consultation fall into four main groups as follows:

- Airlines – From an en-route perspective, the airlines were broadly supportive of rationalisation with reduced capital costs for NATS being a major point in its favour. Two operators did express concerns: one because they use VOR/DME as a gross error check of FMS information on one particular fleet, and the other because they operate predominantly outside controlled airspace and rely heavily on VOR/DME for navigation since they do not have to be RNAV compliant. From a terminal perspective, there was some concern regarding the replacement of VOR-based instrument approaches where these provided a back-up to ILS and where the only alternative to VOR approaches would be those based on NDB which would require equipage changes and was considered a retrograde step.
- Airports – The main area of concern was potentially the need to replace current VOR-based instrument approaches, SIDs and STARs and the associated cost and resource issues. Back-up procedures for ILS runways would still be needed and alternative procedures for non-ILS runways that currently make use of VOR would be required. There was also concern that the timelines for VOR rationalisation and the extension of GNSS capabilities do not correlate and that aircraft from other regions may not be as advanced in terms of equipment and capability to support the NATS plan. Some airports expressed concern about the potential increase in infringements of controlled airspace by non-GPS equipped GA aircraft.

- GA – The feeling was that VOR rationalisation should take account of the fact that a significant number of aircraft will be gaining B-RNAV approval on the basis of VOR/DME equipage and there were concerns regarding the cost of fitting approved GPS equipment. VORs are used by GA pilots for navigation, e.g. above cloud outside controlled airspace, and to help with the avoidance of airspace infringements. Compliance to more advanced RNAV standards would be less straightforward and there were concerns regarding the implications for current training syllabi and for safety generally.
- Military – Concern was raised regarding the effects of withdrawal of some VORs on Search and Rescue operations since VOR/DME information is used extensively to back up GPS information given that the GPS system is not cleared for use as a primary navigation or internal approach aid. The Air Transport force operates to many locations where VOR approaches are the only ones available and therefore considers the retention of such approaches in the UK as important to its training.

NATS have now provided more detailed plans for the proposed VOR rationalisation programme, including the planned dates for the removal of beacons. The rationalisation is planned in three stages with the first nine sites scheduled for decommissioning by 2013, a further nine by 2015 and the final ten by 2017. Discussions are ongoing between DAP, NATS and affected parties on aspects of the VOR rationalisation plan and it should be noted that the plan will be undertaken in accordance with the DAP Policy for Changes to the UK Ground Navigation Infrastructure. This will require NATS to produce impact assessments for each beacon withdrawal and these will include consultation with parties affected by the proposed change.

Updates on progress of the VOR rationalisation plan will be provided at the next NATMAC meeting on 28 Oct and, if deemed appropriate, through further informative letters.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Swan

Mark Swan
Director