Seattle-Tacoma International Airport

Aircraft Arrival Altitude Analysis

May 23, 2018
Presentation Overview

• Topics discussed at the January 24th meeting

• Relationship between aircraft altitude and aircraft noise exposure

• Purpose of the Altitude Analysis

• Have there been notable changes in arrival altitudes between 2013, 2015, and 2017?

• Summary

• Questions
Topics discussed at the January 24th meeting

• Questions answered during the January 24th Meeting –
  - Since 2013 there has been an increase in the number of arrivals to SEA.
  - There was no notable change in traffic flow (north flow, south flow) between 2013, 2015, and 2017.
  - There was a notable difference in arrival runway use between 2013, 2015, and 2017 with traffic shifting from the center runways to the right and left runways.
  - Both the narrow body and wide body fleet mix serving SEA changed between 2013 and 2017 in so much as there has been an increase in use of some aircraft types and a decrease in use of others.
Relationship between aircraft altitude and aircraft noise exposure

• Aircraft noise heard on the ground is a function of the:
  - Distance from the aircraft to the listener,
  - Aircraft thrust settings,
  - Aircraft configuration (i.e., is the aircraft “clean” or “dirty”?), and
  - Meteorological conditions (e.g., wind, humidity, inversions, etc.)

• On arrival, aircraft are:
  - Following vertical and horizontal guidance to the runway,
  - Using approach thrust settings and adjusting them as necessary to maintain a stabilized approach, and
  - Configured for landing with flaps, slats, and landing gear extended (i.e., the aircraft is “dirty”)
Definition of a Stabilized Approach

“A stabilized approach is one in which the pilot establishes and maintains a constant angle glide path towards a predetermined point on the landing runway.”


• Published instrument approaches standardize the approach process making stabilized approaches routine

• Instrument Landing Systems (ILS) at the airport and Flight Management Systems (FMS) in the cockpit utilize precision guidance to keep aircraft on the desired approach course and glide slope
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Aircraft Arrival Altitude Analysis

Sample Approach Plates for Runways 16R and 34L

Source: Federal Aviation Administration

Source: Federal Aviation Administration
Sample Approach Plate for Runway 16R

- Approach plate data in each aircraft’s FMS includes:
  - Course guidance (heading)
  - Minimum altitudes at points (fixes) along the approach course

- Pilots are required to follow the approach plate guidance

Source: Federal Aviation Administration
ILS Provides Vertical and Horizontal Guidance

Source: RBRN.com
Depiction of Aircraft Noise Propagation

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Aircraft Arrival Altitude Analysis

Depiction of Aircraft Noise Propagation

Figure 1. Generalized departure noise contour and geometric relationships to noise certification measurement locations

“Figure 2.2 shows the effect of the difference between the noise certification limits of the various chapters. It illustrates the areas that are exposed to noise levels greater than 80 dB during one landing and take-off for aircraft that just meet the various Chapter limits.”

Source: European Aviation Safety Agency, the European Environment Agency and EUROCONTROL, Figure 2.2, European Aviation Environmental Report, 2016.
Purpose of the Altitude Analysis

• To determine whether changes to aircraft arrival altitudes have occurred over the last five years

• Basis of the analysis –
  
  – Radar flight track data sets for the months of July and December 2013, 2015, and 2017
  – Apples-to-apples comparison of aircraft arrivals to SEA for these time periods

• Analysis details –
  
  – Radar flight tracks were analyzed to evaluate average aircraft altitudes at six nautical miles from SEA in both North and South Flow
Have there been notable changes in arrival altitudes between 2013, 2015, and 2017?

- Answer - No.

- Aircraft altitudes on arrival from both the north and the south have remained very consistent year over year

  - For example, between 2013 and 2017, the difference in average altitude for north flow arrivals 6 NM from the Runway 34R end was approximately 55 feet. In comparison, the tail of a 747-800 is approximately 64 feet in height. The difference in altitude is less than the height of a common wide body aircraft.

- Aircraft are following the glideslopes in the published approach procedures
Summer Flight Tracks
North Flow Arrivals Over Federal Way, WA – July 2013

Runway 34L, 34C, and 34R Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,557.4’
Number of Tracks: 8,319

South Gate is approximately 6 NM south of the Runway 34R end
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Aircraft Arrival Altitude Analysis


Runway 34L, 34C, and 34R Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,420.2’
Number of Tracks: 11,047

South Gate is approximately 6 NM south of the Runway 34R end

Note: Runway 34C was closed May 6 – October 26, 2015
North Flow Arrivals Over Federal Way, WA – July 2017

Runway 34L, 34C, and 34R Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,502.2’
Number of Tracks: 11,436

South Gate is approximately 6 NM south of the Runway 34R end
Difference in Average Altitude at Gate Between July 2013 and 2017 = 55.2’
South Flow Arrivals Over Seattle, WA – July 2013

Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R
Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,455.4’
Number of Tracks: 6,602

North Gate is approximately
6 NM north of the Runway
16L, 16C, and 16R ends
South Flow Arrivals Over Seattle, WA – July 2015

North Gate is approximately 6 NM north of the Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R ends

Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R
Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,416.0’
Number of Tracks: 7,387
South Flow Arrivals Over Seattle, WA – July 2017

Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,411.5’
Number of Tracks: 8,374

North Gate is approximately 6 NM north of the Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R ends
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Aircraft Arrival Altitude Analysis

Difference in Average Altitude at Gate Between July 2013 and 2017 = -43.9’
Winter Flight Tracks
North Flow Arrivals Over Federal Way, WA – December 2013

Runway 34L, 34C, and 34R
Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,470.3’
Number of Tracks: 1,978

South Gate is approximately 6 NM south of the Runway 34R end
North Flow Arrivals Over Federal Way, WA – December 2015

Runway 34L, 34C, and 34R
Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,459.9’
Number of Tracks: 1,953

South Gate is approximately 6 NM south of the Runway 34R end
North Flow Arrivals Over Federal Way, WA – December 2017

Runway 34L, 34C, and 34R
Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,454.2’
Number of Tracks: 4,554

South Gate is approximately
6 NM south of the Runway
34R end
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Aircraft Arrival Altitude Analysis

Difference in Average Altitude at Gate Between December 2013 and 2017 = -16.1’
South Flow Arrivals Over Seattle, WA – December 2013

Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R
Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,374.8’
Number of Tracks: 10,479

North Gate is approximately 6 NM north of the Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R ends
South Flow Arrivals Over Seattle, WA – December 2015

Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R
Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,364.6’
Number of Tracks: 13,927

North Gate is approximately
6 NM north of the Runway
16L, 16C, and 16R ends
South Flow Arrivals Over Seattle, WA – December 2017

Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R Arrival Altitude MSL:
Average (Mean) – 2,368.0’
Number of Tracks: 12,774

North Gate is approximately 6 NM north of the Runway 16L, 16C, and 16R ends
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Aircraft Arrival Altitude Analysis

Difference in Average Altitude at Gate Between December 2013 and 2017 = -6.8’
Examples of Vertical Profiles
North Flow Arrivals to Runway 34 L/C/R Ends - July 2017

Note: Location of the depicted glide slope lines are approximate.
South Flow Arrivals to Runway 16 L/C/R Ends - July 2017

3-degree glide slope

6NM North Gate (Approx.)

Note: Location of the depicted glide slope line is approximate.
Comparison of a Boeing 737-900 and Boeing 787-900 at an altitude of 2,500’ MSL

Source: Environmental Science Associates
Summary

• Aircraft altitudes on arrival from both the north and the south have remained very consistent year over year

• Aircraft are following the glideslopes in the published approach procedures

There have been no notable changes in aircraft arrival altitudes between 2013, 2015, and 2017
Historic Hourly Air Cargo Operations at SEA

Arrivals

Departures

2017

2016

2015

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Questions from the Forum Members