NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The Federal Aviation Administration will shut down windshear detectors at New Orleans International Airport for the last two weeks in June to set up what officials say will be the most advanced detection system in the nation.

The fact that windshear caused a Pan Am jet to crash on takeoff from the airport in 1982, killing 154 people, is among the reasons that New Orleans was chosen as a test site, said Dan Rebhun, low-level windshear program manager in Washington.

Windshear is a sudden change in wind direction and speed, usually during a thunderstorm, and Rebhun noted that the city has many thunderstorms.

The FAA doesn’t believe the shutdown will endanger airplane passengers flying into and out of the airport, he said.

“We certainly hope it doesn’t,” he said. “But there’s nothing else we can do if we want to install the new system. If we could figure out another way, we certainly would do it.”

He noted that only 59 of the nation’s 1,500 airports have such detectors, although they soon will be installed in another 51.

He said five sensors to measure wind speed and direction will be added to the six now installed at the airport, and all 11 will be connected to a new computer that is more advanced than the one in use now.

The entire system must be shut down from June 18 to about July 2 to connect the sensors to the new computer and to check the system, Rebhun said.

The airport control tower will be taking extra precautions, said Ken Friar, the airport’s air-traffic facility manager.

“We’ll be warning pilots when there is (See WINDSHEAR, 98)
thunderstorm activity in the area, and that windshear is possible,” he said.

Until about five years ago, no airport had a windshear detection system — and only a few do today, Friar said.

“Windshear detection is an important provision, but it’s not critical to air traffic control,” he said.

The system was to be installed in February, but Fairchild Weston Corp., the Sarasota, Fla., company manufacturing the equipment, needed extra time to work out difficulties in the new computer, the FAA said earlier.

The FAA is paying for the enhanced system, which will cost more than $350,000.

The FAA will collect data from the 11 sensors 24 hours a day for a year, and will use that information to compare the enhanced system to other windshear detectors in use.

“If there is a significant difference, we will modify all the other systems at the other airports,” Rebhun said. Those modifications probably won’t be made for 1½ to two years, he said.