New windshear detection gear now in place

KENNER (AP) - New Orleans International Airport got the nation's most advanced windshear detection system on Friday, 10 days short of the second anniversary of the crash of Pan Am Flight 759.

Windshear - an abrupt shift in wind direction and speed - was the cause of the July 9, 1982, Pan Am jetliner crash that killed 154 people, the second-worst aviation disaster in U.S. history.

Dan Gardner, a coordinator for the Federal Aviation Administration in New Orleans, said the new detection system will provide more information to pilots.

The old system had six sensors in various locations on the field, measuring wind speed and direction and feeding the data to a computer.

The new system adds five similar sensors and links them with a larger, more sophisticated computer. It was made by Fairchild Weston Corp. of Sarasota, Fla.

The FAA, which maintains the gear, said it cost about $500,000 to build and install the system and to train airport workers in its use.

Until five years ago, none of the country's 1,500 airports had windshear detection systems. Only 59 have them today, said Dan Rebhun, the FAA's windshear program manager in Washington, D.C.

The federal men did not know whether data from the new system could have prevented the tragedy of Flight 759.

"The windshear detection system doesn't prevent windshear, it only detects it," Gardner said. "The system we had in 1982 detected windshear the day the plane crashed."

Rebhun said although the new system is not experimental, New Orleans will be a test site.

"We'll be collecting data on winds here for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for a year," Rebhun said. "That information will be sent to our technical center in Atlantic City, N.J., so we can see how we should modify our windshear systems around the country."

The FAA said it chose New Orleans for the system because of the climate, which frequently produces windshear.

The old system was disconnected over the past two weeks while the new devices were installed, but aircraft flying in and out of the airport did not experience any problems due to the shutdown.

"Fortunately, during the last two weeks there was very little wind activity, even though we had a few thunderstorms," said assistant tower chief Chuck Shuler.