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## Radio outage led to close calls for aircraft

By Chris Woodyard, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — A three-hour air traffic control outage that grounded hundreds of flights across the West on Tuesday also led to five close calls in which planes failed to keep the recommended minimum distance between each other, the Federal Aviation Administration said Wednesday.

In two incidents, planes that were not able to get information on the proximity of other planes had their collision avoidance alarm systems go off, according to the National Air Traffic Controllers Association. That would require pilots to take evasive action, it said.

The FAA said it doesn't know yet whether evasive action was required. It said that although radio contact failed, radar coverage remained fully operational and aircraft were safely handed off to other air traffic control facilities.

According to the FAA's Paul Turk, the shutdown of radio communication in the West was caused by failure to perform a routine maintenance check on the communication system for the region that covers California, Arizona, Nevada and parts of Utah. The communication system shuts down if the check is not performed every 30 days.

A backup system exists, but it failed, too, because it "was not configured properly," according to the FAA.

"It should be designed so it resets itself, and it didn't," said Heather Awsumb, spokeswoman for the Professional Airways Systems Specialists, the union for FAA maintenance workers.

The communication shutdown happened at 4:40 p.m. PT on Tuesday at the FAA's control center in Palmdale, Calif. It left controllers without the ability to talk by radio to pilots or controllers at other centers. About 400 aircraft were being tracked at the time.

Some controllers used cell phones to call controllers at other facilities to ask them to relay orders to pilots, NATCA spokesman Doug Church said.

With communications down, planes were halted from taking off at airports roughly 200 miles from Palmdale — from Las Vegas to San Diego. That caused a ripple effect, diverting incoming planes to airports across the West. At Los Angeles International, the shutdown caused 600 flights to cancel or divert, airport spokeswoman Nancy Castles said.

Under FAA rules, planes must remain at least 5 miles apart horizontally and 2,000 feet vertically. That didn't happen in five cases. Among them, NATCA said:

- Northwest Airlines Flight 277, a Boeing 757 headed from Detroit to San Diego. It came within 900

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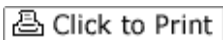
feet vertically and less than a mile horizontally from a Gulfstream III private jet. Northwest spokeswoman Mary Stanick said there were "no issues" involving the jetliner except a delay on its descent.

- A United Parcel Service 757 headed from Louisville to Orange County. It came within 100 feet vertically and less than 2 miles horizontally with a Cessna.

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