

Board Says Faulty Work Led to Airport Disaster

May 27, 2015 [DAN MCCUE](#)



(CN) – The regional authority that runs West Virginia’s Yeager Airport says in a lawsuit that faulty construction at the end of a runway was the proximate cause of the March landslide that destroyed homes, a church and several public roads.

In a lawsuit filed in the Kanawha County, West Virginia circuit court on May 22, the Central West Virginia Regional Airport Authority says it gave notice to its contractors of developing problems with their work, but were effectively told not to worry.

Located outside of Charleston, West Virginia, Yeager Airport sits on a man-made plateau that was constructed in the mid-1940s by removing portions of a ridge and several hilltops. It opened as Kanawha Airport in 1947, and was renamed in honor of Brigadier General Chuck Yeager, who grew up in the area, in 1985.

Yeager made history on October 14, 1947, by piloting the world’s first supersonic flight in the Bell X-1 experimental aircraft. His story was later told — and he was featured in a cameo — in the 1983 film *The Right Stuff*.

As for the airport, its original construction was accomplished with the

moving of more than 9 million cubic yards of earth and rock, much of it accomplished with the aid of more than 2 million pounds of explosives, the complaint says.

In 2003, the court documents say, the plaintiff authority decided to provide a “safety area” for two of its runways, Runway 5 and Runway 23.

At Runway 5 the project entailed creating a 500-foot extension of the runway’s southernmost end and the use of an engineered material arresting system.

An EMAS system is a network of specialized air-entrained cement blocks placed at the end of a runway. In an emergency, an aircraft can be driven onto the blocks, which are meant to collapse under the weight of the plane, stopping its motion and preventing a crash.

“Because of Yeager Airport’s location on top of a ridge, extending the runway was not possible without dramatically altering the natural grade of the land,” the complaint says.

“The Runway 5 extension project involved disturbing at least 42.5 acres of vegetated and forested land, including at least 13.75 acres of clear-cutting,” the complaint continues. “Fill and other materials would have to be brought in to construct a mechanically stabilized earth structure ... or manmade slop so the extension could be built at the same elevation as the existing runway.

“The plan called for the movement of approximately 750,000 cubic yards of earth. At the time, this would be the largest [mechanically stabilized earth structure] ever designed and constructed. The total cost for the extensions to both runways was in excess of thirty million dollars,” the complaint says.

The construction work was completed in October 2007. But in July 2014, workers preparing to apply a coat of paint to the EMAS block allegedly noticed something was wrong — there was separation in and around the blocks that

hadn't been there a week earlier.

The authority says it contacted its contractors, who visited the scene, concluded there was nothing wrong with the tiles or the fill they were placed on, and suggested that a survey of the area be performed.

"In fact, defendant [Triad Engineering Inc.] informed the Authority that settlement of as much as 20 inches was within normal range," the complaint says.

"The EMAS area continued to settle uniformly until early 2015," the authority says. "During February and early March of 2015, the settlement of the EMAS area worsened and the Authority began to inform persons and organizations with property directly under the EMAS/MSE structure that they should vacate the area for safety."

On March 11, 2014, the authority held a meeting at which it says it was once again reassured by its principle contractor.

"... asked by a Board member what the chances were of a catastrophic failure of the EMAS.MSE area ... The representative of defendant Triad answered, 'very slight,'" the complaint says.

Less than 24 hours later, however, the area at the end of Runway 5 failed, "sending hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of fill and other material cascading down and onto the Keystone Drive area of Charleston destroying homes, a church, public roads and damming a stream," the complaint says. "All utilities in the area, including natural gas, electricity, water, sewer, telephone and fiber-optic services were destroyed. The damages suffered by the residents of Keystone Drive and the Authority total n the millions of dollars."

"In addition to the loss of millions of dollars invested in the original EMAS.MSE structure's design and construction, the Authority has or will lose

millions of dollars in remediation of the damages and the response to the damages caused by the wrongful conduct of the defendants, including the millions of dollars necessary to rebuild the RSA lost when the EMAS.MSE structure catastrophically failed.”

The defendants in the case include several contractors and engineering firms and their insurers.

The authority sees compensatory and punitive damages, as well as declaratory relief on claims of negligence, breach of implied and express warranty, breach of contract, strict product liability, and breach of implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose.

The authority is represented by Scott Segal of the Segal Law Firm, and Timothy Bailey and Mark Barney of Bucci, Bailey & Javins. Both firms are located in Charleston, West Virginia.

Representatives of the defendants could not immediately be reached for comment Wednesday morning.





