

A new snow yardstick for BWI

Maryland Environmental Service will measure snow at airport this winter
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When the snowflakes start flying at Baltimore's airport this winter, a new group of employees will be wielding the yardstick.

Maryland Environmental Service, an independent state agency, is replacing a federal contractor that inadvertently inflated last year's snow totals by failing to follow the rules prescribed by the National Weather Service.

The errors forced meteorologists to recalculate both individual storm accumulations at Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport and the seasonal snow totals. **That knocked more than 3 inches from the previous total. The result was a "conservative estimate," meteorologists admitted, but nevertheless a record 77 inches.**

"Fortunately or unfortunately, there is a policy prescribed by the National Climatic Data Center that we've got to follow," said James E. Lee, meteorologist in charge at the weather service's Baltimore- Washington forecast office, in Sterling, Va.

"We think we're starting on a real good track this year for climatological snowfall observations at the three major airports we cover," he said.

MES spokeswoman Christina Garrigan said the weather service contract is not yet final. But employees will be trained to do the snow measurements in the manner prescribed by the National Weather Service.

The previous contractor had been following requirements of the Federal Aviation Administration, which calls for measurements of snow accumulation every hour. Workers then

wipe the snow board clear, repeating every hour until the snow stops. That's important to give pilots an accurate picture of the changing pace of snow accumulation.

But climatologists have other needs. The weather service asks technicians to measure and wipe every six hours. That allows for some natural settling of the snow, reflecting more closely what's happening in the surrounding community. But it also results in lower accumulation totals than the hourly measurements.

Maryland Environmental Service employees already are on the job around the clock at BWI, assisting with recycling programs and storm water monitoring, said BWI spokesman Jonathan Dean.

The measurements will be taken at a new location, in a grassy area about 0.8 miles east of the BWI terminal. The terminal rooftop where the Federal Aviation Administration contractor measures the snow does not comply with weather service guidelines.

The Maryland Environmental Service was created by the legislature in 1970 to "protect the state's air, land and water resources." It provides water and wastewater treatment services, solid waste management, recycling, hazardous materials cleanup and other services to public and private entities for a fee. The weather service said it will pay MES \$115 a month for the BWI snow measurements, plus \$4 per observation.

The problems at BWI surfaced Feb. 6, as snow piled up during the second two-day blizzard of the season. When the total reported from BWI appeared to have surpassed the BWI record — the 24.4-inches from a February 2003 storm — reporters called Sterling to ask whether a new record had been declared.