Wind shear tests

NASA Langley engineers are preparing to return to Florida to wrap up tests that may one day prevent deadly airplane crashes.

Flying a jetliner through potentially dangerous wind conditions, the Langley team will test instruments that will someday warn pilots of the treacherous wind condition known as "wind shear."

Langley employees spent part of last summer in Orlando and Denver testing a variety of instruments that use radar and lasers to measure wind speeds.

The instruments are now being placed aboard a test plane, a NASA 737. Mike Lewis, who is working on the project, said engineers plan to spend three weeks in August testing the instruments.

Wind shear is associated with thunderstorms.

It's a sudden downdraft that can cause planes to crash while landing. Engineers stress that the Langley craft flies at altitudes high enough that its flight is not affected by wind shear.

Lewis said the summer flights should wrap up the wind shear program and allow engineers to rate the various systems for detecting wind shear.

By Kirk Saville