Follow-up on local news

Safer airliners

After more than a month of flying through potentially dangerous wind conditions, NASA Langley Research Center engineers think they’ve come up with data that can make planes safer.

To test instruments for detecting a wind shear, a dangerous downdraft associated with thunderstorms, the group flew Langley’s 737 research plane through 16 strong wind shears in Orlando and Denver, said engineer Mike Lewis. If planes encounter it during takeoff or landing, a wind shear can cause a crash.

NASA, with the Federal Aviation Administration, is working on airborne detectors. Lewis said the NASA plane flew through the shears at about 800 feet, high enough to avoid any danger and one detector, a type of modified weather radar, shows promise. Another instrument, using laser beams, could be developed for future use.

It will be up to the aerospace industry to decide which detector to use. "I think the marketplace is going to decide," said Roland Bowles, who heads the wind-shear effort at Langley. The FAA will require that all airliners have wind-shear detectors within three years.

By Kirk Saville