

Lakeland Linder officials say base will be ready for Hurricane Hunters by May 1

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By [Christopher Guinn](#)

LAKELAND — The new home base for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Hurricane Hunters at Lakeland Linder Regional Airport is on schedule to meet the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season, airport officials said.

The group will be able to start moving in on May 1, Airport Manager Gene Conrad said, just about five months after Lakeland Linder was awarded the federal contract.

"We started Dec. 5," he said of the construction. "It's moving at light speed."

About 60 to 80 workers are on the site each day, Conrad said, completing the \$17.5 million project that is less renovation than reconstruction.

NOAA is covering about \$4.5 million of the cost and the state is taking on \$6.5 million. Lakeland Linder is covering another \$6.5 million.

"Essentially it's a whole new building except for two walls and a roof over the office," Conrad said. The hangar, once 32-feet tall, is now 60 feet, and could accommodate larger aircraft like the C-130.

The project has some unique requirements. NOAA's base at Lakeland Linder will be more than a hangar and some offices — a science lab, operational hub and maintenance shop will be included.

The Hurricane Hunters also needed the hangar to house its nine aircraft while allowing easy exit to any of them without having to move more than two other planes out of the way.

But those requirements have been relatively easy to meet, Conrad said, for instance, by putting hangar doors along two walls.

The hardest thing about the project has been the timeline, he said.

He got the first call from the U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA's parent agency, in February saying the science and weather group was leaving MacDill Air Force Base and needed a place to set up, Conrad said.

"As a timeline, that's insane," he said.

The gambit proposed by Conrad and his senior staff members, and approved by the City Commission, has worked out. By the time NOAA announced its selection of Lakeland Linder, the reconstruction project was already underway.

The contract for designing the facility was awarded to the Lakeland-based Lunz Group in September. Lakeland-based Register Construction was selected as the construction manager in early November.

A news conference with NOAA and city officials took place with the gutted facility and heavy machinery as a backdrop.

Typically the window for design is between three and six months for this kind of project, said architect Brad Lunz of the Lunz Group.

"This has been a real fluid process," he said as the team adapted to supply and time realities, like by having Lakeland and Texas-based GMF Structural to design custom trusses to cross the vast hangar space rather than order pre-engineered pieces.

Lunz said most of the work, like the heating, ventilation and cooling work, electrical and finishing, have been performed by Lakeland-based companies.

City Manager Tony Delgado, harkening to his earlier career in live entertainment, calls the NOAA contract a "prestige account," an affiliation that will boost the credibility of the hosting venue.

But it's also about developing the economic engine at the airport, Airport Business Manager John Von Preysing said.

While the aviation group's flights into tropical weather are the dramatic edge of the Hurricane Hunters' operation, the move to Lakeland means 110 highly technical and well-paying jobs are moving to the city, from fabricators to radar techs to scientists.