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NASA wind tunnel damaged, closed

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HAMPTON — The largest wind tunnel at NASA-Langley Research Center was severely damaged when a piece of metal broke loose and crashed into several fiberglass fan blades Wednesday.

The National Transonic Facility wind tunnel will not be operating for several months, said Langley spokesman Keith Henry. Repairs could cost millions of dollars, but a formal damage assessment has not been done.

The tunnel is used to test military and commercial designs for aircraft that fly at speeds up to 880 mph, or just below the speed of sound.

Robert T. Wingate, deputy director for systems engineering and operations

roughly four feet in diameter broke loose and crashed into the 25 fiberglass fan blades that create the wind in the tunnel.

No one was injured.

Henry said that several years ago, a model being tested in another tunnel flew off and smashed into fan blades. It is not known whether this accident is more serious, he said.

Wednesday afternoon the tunnel was being used to test the model of an advanced military craft in conditions simulating roughly 500 mph winds, he said.

The damaged wind tunnel is near the entrance of the NASA research center at Cmdr. Shepard Boulevard.

When in use, temperatures inside the tunnel range from 152 degrees Fahrenheit to minus 300

at NASA-Langley, said the wind tunnel has been sealed off until an investigation board is appointed to look into the accident. Henry said this will probably begin next week.

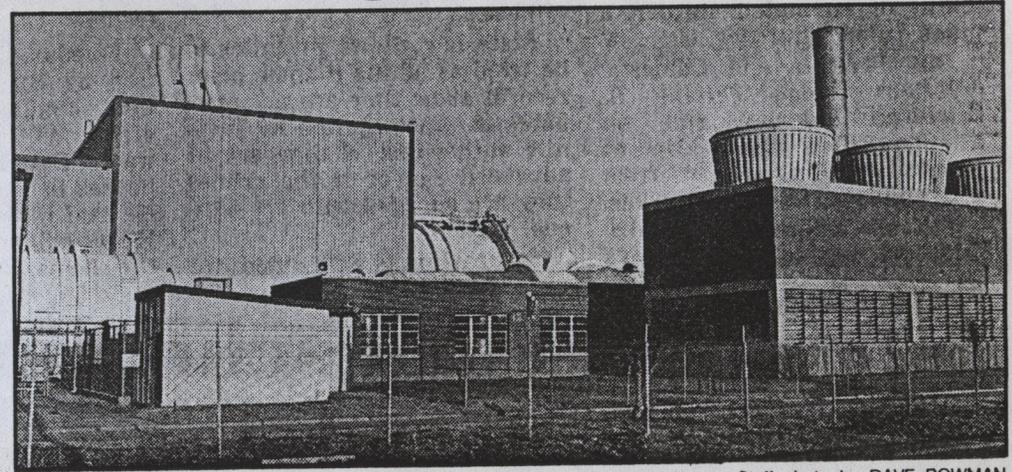
"We really haven't assessed which programs will be affected," Wingate said. "We're in the process of looking into the impact of this."

The accident occurred shortly after 3 p.m. at the newest and largest of NASA-Langley's 40 wind tunnels, Henry said. The 200-foot-long, 48-foot-wide tunnel has a test section of 8 by 25 feet and was completed in 1983.

Although the cause of the accident and many details were not available Thursday, Henry said a piece of metal

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degrees Fahrenheit. The extremely cold temperatures enable researchers to better simulate real flight conditions at high altitudes, Henry said.



Staff photo by DAVE BOWMAN

The newest and largest wind tunnel at NASA-Langley Research Center is shut down.