

Why GAO Did This Study

Over the past two decades, U.S. aviation stakeholders have debated whether FAA should be the entity in the United States that operates and modernizes the ATC system. During this period, GAO reported on challenges FAA has faced in operating and modernizing the ATC system. FAA reorganized several times in attempts to improve its performance and implement an initiative to modernize the ATC system, known as NextGen. Recent budgetary pressures have rekindled industry debate about FAA's efficiency in operating and modernizing the ATC system.

GAO was asked to gather U.S. aviation industry stakeholder views on the operation and modernization of the current ATC system. This report provides perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders on

(1) the performance of the ATC system and the NextGen modernization initiative and any challenges FAA may face in managing these activities and

(2) potential changes that could improve the performance of the ATC system, including the NextGen modernization initiative.

Based on GAO's knowledge and recommendations from interviewees, GAO interviewed a non-probability, non-generalizable sample of 76 U.S. aviation industry stakeholders—including airlines, airports, labor unions, manufacturers, and general aviation—using a semi-structured format with closed and open-ended questions. GAO also discussed the perspectives with current FAA officials. The Department of Transportation provided technical comments on a draft of this product.

View [GAO-14-770](#). For more information, contact Gerald Dillingham, Ph.D., at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM

Selected Stakeholders' Perspectives on Operations, Modernization, and Structure

What GAO Found

The 76 aviation industry stakeholders with whom GAO spoke were generally positive regarding the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) operation of the current air traffic control (ATC) system but identified challenges about transitioning to the Next Generation Air Traffic Control System (NextGen). Specifically, the majority of stakeholders rated FAA as moderately to very capable of operating an efficient ATC system, but the majority also rated FAA as only marginally to moderately capable of implementing NextGen, FAA's initiative to modernize the system. Almost all (75) of the stakeholders identified challenges that they believe FAA faces, particularly in implementing the NextGen initiatives. These challenges included difficulty in (1) convincing reluctant aircraft owners to invest in the aircraft technology necessary to benefit from NextGen (46 stakeholders) and (2) mitigating the effects of an uncertain fiscal environment (43 stakeholders). FAA officials acknowledged and generally agreed with these challenges.

Sixty four stakeholders suggested a range of changes they believe could improve the efficiency of ATC operations and NextGen's implementation. The change stakeholders suggested most often was to modify how FAA's ATC operations and NextGen programs are funded, including the need to ensure that FAA has a predictable and long-term funding source. Other suggested changes were to improve human capital activities, such as air traffic controllers' training, and improve coordination with industry stakeholders. GAO has reported on these issues in the past, and in some cases, made recommendations, with which FAA concurred but has not yet implemented. GAO also asked stakeholders whether separating ATC services from FAA, such as the privatization of the ATC service provider, was an option; 27 of the stakeholders believed it was an option; another 26 believed it was an option, but had significant reservations about such a change. Support for this option was mixed among categories of stakeholders (see table below). Stakeholders identified several issues that would need to be taken into account before making any changes to the provision of ATC services, including lessons learned from other countries, funding sources for such a system, and the extent of Congress's role in overseeing a separate ATC system.

Stakeholder Responses to Whether Separating the Safety Regulator and the Air Traffic Control-Provider Functions into Separate Units or Organizations Is an Option

Industry category (number of stakeholders in category)	Yes	Maybe ^a	No	No opinion	No answer given
Airlines (17)	9	5	1	2	0
Airports (7)	1	3	2	1	0
Aviation experts and other relevant organizations (18)	10	6	2	0	0
General aviation (4)	1	1	1	0	1
Labor unions and professional associations (8)	1	3	2	2	0
Manufacturers and service providers (16)	4	5	3	4	0
Other stakeholders ^b (6)	1	3	1	0	1
Total	27	26	12	9	2

Source: GAO Analysis. | GAO-14-770

^aMaybe represents stakeholders who qualified their "Yes" responses with significant reservations.

^bIncluded in this other category are three industry categories with fewer than four stakeholders—Research & Development Organizations, Other Federal Agencies, and Passenger and Safety Groups.