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NEXT GENERATION AIR TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

Challenges with Partner Agency and FAA Coordination Continue, and Efforts to Integrate Near-, Mid-, and Long-term Activities Are Ongoing

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-10-649T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

To prepare for future air traffic growth, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), including its Joint Planning and Development Office (JPDO) and Air Traffic Organization, is planning and implementing the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) in partnership with other federal agencies, such as the Departments of Commerce, Defense, and Homeland Security, and the aviation industry. NextGen will transform the current radar-based air traffic control system into a satellite-based system. As FAA begins implementing near-and midterm NextGen capabilities, a key challenge will be the extent to which FAA is able to integrate near and midterm improvements (those between 2012 and 2018) with long-term plans (beyond 2018). Furthermore, coordination among federal partner agencies and among various lines of business within FAA is important to ensure that NextGen implementation efforts are aligned.

GAO's testimony focuses on (1) current mechanisms for and challenges to coordination among FAA and its partner agencies in implementing NextGen, (2) challenges and ongoing efforts to improve coordination across offices within FAA, and (3) issues related to integrating near- and midterm implementation plans with long-term NextGen plans. This statement is based on past and ongoing GAO work, and interviews GAO conducted with senior agency officials at FAA, JPDO and its partner agencies, and selected industry stakeholders.

View GAO-10-649T or key components.
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What GAO Found

Several mechanisms to facilitate coordination on NextGen activities among partner agencies and across FAA exist, but challenges to this coordination remain. One interagency coordination mechanism is the Senior Policy Committee, which is the high-level coordinating body across all of the partner agencies. In addition, JPDO is tasked with facilitating day-to-day interagency coordination, and has several mechanisms, including working groups and research transition teams, to accomplish this. GAO has previously reported that a lack of stable leadership and ambiguity surrounding JPDO's organizational position and ongoing role have contributed to the uneven performance of its coordination mechanisms. Recent changes in both the leadership and organizational position of JPDO could improve coordination across partner agencies. Stakeholders and partner agencies identified several other challenges to improving interagency coordination and collaboration, including (1) limited funding and staffing to dedicate to NextGen activities, (2) competing mission priorities, and (3) undefined near-term roles and responsibilities of some partner agencies.

FAA also faces challenges coordinating the implementation of NextGen across multiple FAA offices. GAO has previously reported that shifting from an organization focused on system acquisition to one focused on integration and coordination will be an ongoing challenge for FAA. Recent organizational changes that solidify the FAA Deputy Administrator as the key executive in charge of NextGen may help address these challenges. Moreover, FAA has made progress in improving coordination of efforts within FAA, by coordinating some office functions and moving toward a portfolio approach for implementation. However, as all these changes have recently occurred, it is too early to measure their success.

Integration of midterm implementation plans with the long-term plans and vision for NextGen is currently an ongoing effort within FAA. FAA officials and several stakeholders described FAA's near- and midterm efforts—such as implementing satellite-based surveillance of aircraft—as necessary stepping-stones to the long-term plans and vision of NextGen—such as aircraft operators receiving satellite surveillance information in the cockpit and using it to self-separate from surrounding aircraft. Early success in implementing NextGen capabilities will help build confidence among aircraft operators that FAA can and will provide the operational improvements necessary for operators to realize benefits from their equipment investments. However, some stakeholders expressed concern that near- and midterm implementation efforts are not integrated well enough with the long-term vision. Stakeholders identified key policy decisions that will affect the vision of the NextGen system over the long term and in turn determine whether programs, technologies, and capabilities implemented today will be the stepping-stones to future, more advanced capabilities. Key decisions include such issues as the installation of aircraft equipment, expediting environmental reviews, and the extent to which additional airport capacity will be needed.