
March 1995

Transportation and Telecommunications Issue Area Plan

Fiscal Years 1995-97



Foreword

The Transportation and Telecommunications issue area is one of the General Accounting Office's 35 issue areas. Relying heavily on input from congressional committees, as well as industry, academia, and agency officials and other experts, GAO develops plans to ensure that our resources are focused on the most important concerns of the Congress.

GAO serves as a source of timely, accurate information and unbiased analysis for decisionmakers in the Congress and executive agencies. For each issue area, GAO's strategic plan describes the significance of the issues, our objectives, and the focus of our work. Our work includes such products as reports, briefings, and testimonies.

The Transportation and Telecommunications issue area reviews the Department of Transportation (DOT) and its operating administrations, Federal Communications Commission, Federal Maritime Commission, Interstate Commerce Commission, National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak), and National Transportation Safety Board.

GAO's program evaluation and performance work in the transportation sector generally focuses on safe and efficient travel, cost-effective investment in infrastructure, and the promotion of industry competition and financial health in a largely deregulated environment. In the telecommunications sector, we focus on consumer access to services, the federal regulatory role, and competitiveness in the industry. The principal issues are

- maintaining the safety of the nation's air transport system and improving the airport and air traffic control infrastructure;
- evaluating reorganization proposals for reforming the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) air traffic control functions, restructuring the Department of Transportation, and reexamining the functions performed by other agencies, such as the Interstate Commerce Commission;
- reducing the risk of fatalities and injuries in surface transportation and the resulting economic costs;
- improving the nation's surface transportation infrastructure in terms of quality and the cost-effectiveness of investments, enhancing the use of innovative financing alternatives, and supporting the development of the 160,000-mile National Highway System;

- sustaining an internationally competitive aviation industry and financially viable domestic passenger rail service (Amtrak);
- maintaining an efficient and effective U.S. Coast Guard and Maritime Administration;
- analyzing cross-cutting and consumer protection issues that apply to DOT agencywide, such as improving financial management, strengthening oversight of “mega” infrastructure projects such as the Boston Harbor Tunnel and Denver Airport, responding to public concerns, and identifying opportunities to save funds in all transportation modes; and
- encouraging the development of the telecommunications industry through increased competition and facilitating the development of the information superhighway.

In the pages that follow, we describe our key planned work on these issues.

Because events may significantly affect even the best of plans, our planning process allows for updating the plan and responding quickly to emerging issues. If you have any questions or suggestions about this plan, please call me at (202) 512-2834.



Kenneth M. Mead
Director
Transportation and Telecommunications Issues

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Table I: Key Issues

| Issue | Significance |
|--|---|
| Aviation safety: Does FAA adequately oversee the aviation industry's compliance with federal safety and security regulations? | Over the next several years, FAA faces major challenges in how to deal with the effects of a downsized work force, air traffic control corporatization proposals, and increased globalization of the aviation industry, all within the context of continuing to maintain a high level of safety in the U.S. air transportation system. |
| Aviation infrastructure: How can FAA enhance the safety, capacity, and efficiency of the nation's airport and airway system? | FAA is at a critical juncture in its air traffic control modernization program because (1) ongoing acquisitions are being fielded, (2) the automation plan for air traffic control facilities is undergoing radical restructuring, and (3) new, costly major acquisitions (e.g., the wide-area augmentation system for satellite navigation) are in the earliest phases. |
| Surface transportation safety: How can surface transportation be improved to promote safety and reduce program and societal costs? | Although the number of people who die in transportation accidents is lower than it has been in 30 years, 40,000 people still die on highways each year. In addition, nearly \$15 billion is spent annually on health care related to traffic accidents. |
| Surface transportation infrastructure: Do the current highway, bridge, mass transit, and rail programs adequately meet the nation's surface transportation needs? | The focus on highways is changing from building interstates to shaping the 160,000-mile National Highway System. There are many unresolved implementation issues, including funding implications and priorities of the new system, protecting the existing investment, and synchronizing the often conflicting goals of clean air, energy conservation, and reduced traffic congestion. |

Table I: Key Issues

| Objectives | Focus of Work |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess how FAA can better establish and deploy the required safety work force so that it is both efficient and effective.• Reinforce FAA's greater implementation of prior recommendations from GAO, the National Transportation Safety Board, and the DOT Inspector General that will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of its air traffic management and industry oversight functions.• Assess ways to better position FAA to capitalize on technological breakthroughs that can enhance the safety and security of the U.S. air transportation system. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• FAA's certification and oversight of new aircraft and airlines• Oversight of commuter airlines and general aviation• Implementation of prior safety recommendations• Technology/automation development, deployment, and impact on air traffic controller work force |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Propose FAA acquisition management reforms that minimize schedule slippages/cost overruns.• Recommend improvements to FAA's automation program in light of the cancelled segments of the Advanced Automation System acquisition.• Improve DOT's management of the Airport Improvement Program and passenger facility charges. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluation of various alternative structures for FAA's air traffic control functions• Scrub of FAA's fiscal year 1996 facilities and equipment budget• Status of FAA's air traffic control modernization program• Evaluation of FAA's acquisition management• Review of innovative and alternative funding mechanisms for airport development |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recommend improvements to federal regulations aimed at reducing transportation-related accidents, deaths, and serious injuries.• Assess DOT's progress in implementing safety provisions of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and pipeline and hazardous materials legislation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Methods to deal effectively with problem drivers• Effect of Amtrak's financial problems on safety and service quality• Rail and truck safety issues relating to NAFTA and the National Highway System• Methods to improve safety around dangerous rail/highway grade crossings• Federal/state/local oversight of commuter rail safety |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recommend cost-saving strategies that (1) maximize federal, state, and local governments' investments in highways, mass transit, and high-speed rail development; (2) encourage public/private partnerships to finance transportation needs; and (3) advance passenger rail alternatives.• Recommend strategies for improving federal, state, and local government management of highway and transit programs, including integration with energy and environmental issues. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Metropolitan planning organizations' roles in post-ISTEA planning• Use of private sector financing• Conformity provisions of the Clean Air Act• Options for allocating federal highway funds |

Table I: Key Issues

| Issue | Significance |
|--|--|
| Competition and financial health: How does the federal role in transportation ensure adequate competition in a worldwide environment and affect the economic welfare of travelers and shippers? | The globalization of the economy and the formation of international trading blocs like the European Union present a challenge to the financial health and competitive position of U.S. transportation interests. Seeking maximum benefits from deregulation in trucking, rail, and aviation while ensuring competitive rates and quality service may be an important part of the nation's strategy to meet this challenge. In addition, providing nationwide, economically viable passenger rail service within the available resources may be the subject of considerable congressional interest. |
| Coast Guard and Maritime Administration: How efficient and effective are the U.S. Coast Guard and Maritime Administration in carrying out their programs and policies? | The Coast Guard has developed plans to downsize the agency. The Congress may need assurances that this plan is fiscally and organizationally sound and includes the appropriate mix of military and civilian personnel to meet the agency's numerous missions. |
| Cross-cutting issues and consumer protection: How can agencywide DOT management and organization be improved and how well does DOT respond to the public's concerns? | The Congress and the administration have mandated that federal agencies, including DOT, improve their accountability for the effective and efficient use of budgetary resources and their responsiveness to the public in carrying out their missions. Particularly on "mega" infrastructure projects, the federal government has a vital stake in ensuring that projects such as the Denver Airport and Boston Harbor Tunnel are completed efficiently and promptly. |
| Telecommunications, competition, and regulation: What role should federal, state, and local governments play and what regulations are needed for telecommunications and the information superhighway? | The telecommunications industry is in the midst of a technological revolution. The boundaries between various sectors such as telephone and cable are blurring, suggesting the need for a reassessment of existing federal and state regulatory structures. Other issues of national concern are the equity of access to services, privacy, security, and domestic and international competitiveness. |

Table I: Key Issues

| Objectives | Focus of work |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study the effect of foreign aviation policies and competition on U.S. interests. • Assess threats to competition and the well-being of shippers and travelers. • Evaluate options to ensure the benefits of deregulation. • Assess the costs/benefits of high-speed ground transportation options for freight and passengers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of the critical issues in the reauthorization of Amtrak, including restructuring the route system • Assessment of benefits and costs of high-speed ground transportation • Evaluation of Passenger/freight rail trackage issues • Impact of deregulation on transportation labor |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the Coast Guard's downsizing efforts to ensure that they are fiscally and organizationally sound. • Recommend potential improvements in the Coast Guard's and Maritime Administration's use of resources, priority setting, oversight and management of programs, and acquisition and planning processes. • Determine the impact of the Coast Guard's budget on implementing key legislation on pollution and safety. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-saving and downsizing strategies that may be useful for congressional oversight of the agencies' budgets for operating expenses and acquisitions, construction, and improvements • A descriptive analysis of safety enforcement and environmental protection activities. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess DOT's proposal for restructuring and streamlining the department to ensure appropriate continued emphasis on safety and infrastructure concerns. • Aid the Congress in defining the appropriate federal role in financing and oversight of "mega" infrastructure projects. • Recommend potential improvements in DOT's and the operating administrations' contracting, acquisition, and approval of licenses for commercial space. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DOT's restructuring proposal • DOT's use of working capital funds • Federal oversight of Denver Airport and Boston Harbor Tunnel projects • Effectiveness of DOT's Office of Commercial Space Transportation |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information to the Congress on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — competitive and regulatory options, — improvements in the organization and management at the federal, state, and local levels, — security, privacy, and intellectual property rights and consumers' access to the information superhighway, and — the nature and impact of other nations' telecommunications policies and management. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of legislation to manage the transition to more competitive telecommunications markets • The U.S. government's ability to manage the new telecommunications landscape • State efforts to promote advanced telecommunications technologies |

Table II: Planned Major Work

| Issue | Planned major job starts |
|--|---|
| Aviation safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Evaluate FAA's efforts to develop and deploy new safety technologies —Review FAA's collection and use of aviation safety indicators —Assess FAA's certification and oversight of new aircraft and airlines —Evaluate oversight of commuter airlines and general aviation —Assess implementation of GAO, NTSB & DOT IG prior safety recommendations |
| Aviation infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Review restructuring proposals for FAA's air traffic control functions —Review savings in FAA's fiscal year 1996 facilities and equipment budget —Identify status of FAA's air traffic control modernization program —Evaluate FAA's acquisition management —Review passenger facility charge funding of airport development —Assess FAA's automation program plan |
| Surface transportation safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Evaluate programs dealing with repeat problem drivers —Review impact of Amtrak's financial problems on safety and service quality —Review rail and truck safety issues relating to NAFTA and NHS —Assess ways to improve safety around dangerous rail/highway grade crossings —Evaluate ways to achieve goal of 75 percent seat belt use goal and ensure reliable data —Assess federal/state and local oversight of commuter rail safety —Assess implementation of safety provisions in 1990 Hazardous Materials Transport Act —Review effectiveness of DOT's Office of Pipeline Safety |
| Surface transportation infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Evaluate metropolitan planning organizations' role in post-ISTEA planning —Assess use of private sector finance —Review conformity provisions of the Clean Air Act —Assess options for allocating federal highway funds —Review federal investment in northeast corridor/other high-speed rail projects |
| Competition and financial health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Assess ability of intercity buses to replace Amtrak —Assess benefits and costs of high-speed ground transportation —Evaluate passenger/freight rail trackage issues —Review transportation labor under deregulation |
| Coast Guard and Maritime Administration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Assess MARPOL V enforcement —Review Coast Guard's use of marine safety billets —Assess Coast Guard downsizing efforts —Review implementation status of the Oil Pollution Control Act of 1990 |
| Cross-cutting and consumer protection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Review DOT's reorganization proposal —Review federal oversight of the Boston Harbor Tunnel project —Review federal oversight of the Denver Airport project —Review effectiveness of DOT's Office of Commercial Space Transportation —Assess DOT's use of working capital funds, reimbursable agreements, and inter-appropriation transfers |
| Telecommunications, competition, and regulation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Assess U.S. government's ability to manage new telecommunications landscape —Review state efforts to promote advanced telecommunications technologies —Review issues that affect the competitiveness of U.S. companies in the global market |

Table III: GAO Contacts

| | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|--|
| Director | Kenneth Mead | (202) 512-2834 |
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| | | •Responsible for aviation, Coast Guard and maritime issues. |
| | Barry Hill | (202) 512-9775 |
| | | •Responsible for surface transportaion, telecommunications and cross-cutting issues. |

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