Less than one-half of the 49 key active-duty aircraft models that GAO reviewed met their MC or FMC goals during fiscal years 1998-2002. The levels of mission capability varied by military service and type of aircraft, and the levels at which the goals were set also varied widely, even among the same type of aircraft. However, the MC and FMC goals for each model changed little over time. Since 1998, only 11 of 49 aircraft models (22 percent) experienced a change to their goals. Seven of the changes were to raise the goals to higher levels. Difficulties in meeting the goals are caused by a complex combination of logistical and operational factors.

Percentage of Aircraft Models Meeting MC and FMC Goals, Fiscal Years 1998-2002

Despite their importance, DOD does not have a clear and defined process for setting aircraft availability goals. The goal-setting process is largely undefined and undocumented, and there is widespread uncertainty among the military services over how the goals were established, who is responsible for setting them, and the continuing adequacy of MC and FMC goals as measures of aircraft availability. Uncertainty and the lack of documentation in setting the goals ultimately obscures basic perceptions of readiness and operational effectiveness, undermines congressional confidence in the basis for DOD’s funding requests, and brings into question the appropriateness of those goals to the new defense strategy. DOD guidance does not define the availability goals that the services must establish or require any objective methodology for setting them. Nor does it require the services to identify one office as the coordinating agent for goal setting or to document the basis for the goals chosen. DOD officials told GAO that the guidance has not been updated since 1990 to reflect the new security environment of increased deployments and other changes since the end of the Cold War.