NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM

Regional Airport Planning Could Help Address Congestion If Plans Were Integrated with FAA and Airport Decision Making

Why GAO Did This Study

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) predicts that the national airspace system will become increasingly congested over time, imposing costs of delay on passengers and regions. While transforming the current air-traffic control system to the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) may provide additional en route capacity, many airports will still face constraints at their runways and terminals. In light of these forecasts, GAO was asked to evaluate regional airport planning in metropolitan regions with congested airports.

GAO (1) identified which airports are currently or will be significantly congested and the potential benefits of regional airport planning, (2) assessed how regions with congested airports use regional airport planning in decision making, and (3) identified factors that hinder or aid in the development and implementation of regional airport plans. GAO reviewed studies; interviewed FAA, airport, and other aviation and transportation officials; and conducted case studies in selected regions.

What GAO Found

A number of airports are or will be significantly capacity constrained and thus congested within the next 16 years. However, many of them face environmental and other obstacles to developing additional airport capacity. In 2007, FAA identified 14 airports (in 10 metropolitan regions) that will be significantly capacity constrained by 2025, even assuming all currently planned improvements occur (see figure). Planned improvements include airport construction projects and implementation of NextGen technologies. Without these improvements, FAA predicts that 27 airports will be congested. According to the FAA assessment and other studies, regional airport planning may identify additional solutions, such as the increased use of alternate airports or other modes of travel, to help relieve airport congestion.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of Transportation direct FAA to create a review process for RASPs and use its existing authority to give priority to funding airport projects that are consistent with RASPs. The Department of Transportation generally agreed to consider the revised recommendations.

View GAO-10-120 or key components. For more information, contact Gerald Dillingham, Ph.D., at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.