Why GAO Did This Study

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is pursuing key operational improvements to implement the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) in the “midterm,” which is 2013 through 2018. These improvements focus on establishing Performance Based Navigation (PBN) procedures at key airports, but benefits could be limited in the midterm. PBN uses satellite-based guidance to improve air-traffic control routes (known as “procedures”). These procedures can deliver benefits to airlines, such as fuel savings and increased efficiency, particularly in congested airspace. To deliver benefits more quickly, FAA made trade-offs in selecting sites and in the scope of proposed improvements. For example, FAA is not implementing procedures that will trigger lengthy environmental reviews. These trade-offs, with which airlines and other stakeholders generally agree, will likely limit benefits from these PBN initiatives early in the midterm. FAA has also made some progress in other key operational improvement areas, such as upgrading traffic management systems and revising standards to improve aircraft flow in congested airspace. However, FAA has not fully integrated implementation of all of its operational improvement efforts at airports. Because of the interdependency of improvements, their limited integration could also limit benefits in the midterm.

What GAO Found

GAO was asked to review FAA’s midterm NextGen efforts. GAO examined (1) key operational improvements FAA is pursuing through 2018, (2) the extent to which FAA is addressing known obstacles to the implementation of NextGen operational improvements, and (3) the extent to which FAA is measuring and demonstrating midterm benefits. GAO reviewed FAA documents, as well as the task force’s recommendations to FAA, and interviewed FAA and airport officials and aviation experts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO’s recommendations will help FAA to better integrate NextGen efforts; develop processes for selecting new PBN procedures; and ensure that stakeholders have needed information on NextGen progress to facilitate investment decisions.

DOT did not agree or disagree with GAO’s recommendations, but provided technical comments.

View GAO-13-264. For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.