

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-829T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate.

Why GAO Did This Study

Among its responsibilities for aviation safety, FAA issues certificates for new aircraft and parts, and grants approvals for changes to air operations and aircraft, based on federal aviation regulations. Various studies, GAO's prior work, and industry stakeholders have raised questions about the efficiency of FAA's certification and approval processes, as well as the consistency of its staff in interpreting aviation regulations. Over time, FAA has implemented efforts to address these issues, but they persist as FAA faces greater industry demand and its overall workload has increased. The 2012 FAA Modernization and Reform Act required FAA to work with industry to resolve these issues. In response, FAA chartered two committees—one to address certification processes and another to address regulatory consistency—which recommended improvements in 2012. In 2013, FAA published an implementation plan for addressing the certification process recommendations and promised to publish an implementation plan for addressing the regulatory consistency recommendations at a later date.

This testimony provides information on FAA's progress in implementing the (1) certification and approval process recommendations and (2) regulatory consistency recommendations. It also discusses future challenges industry stakeholders believe FAA will face in implementing these recommendations. This testimony provides the same information as [GAO-14-728T](#), which was based on GAO products issued from 2010 to 2014, updated in July 2014 through reviews of recent FAA documents and interviews of FAA officials and industry representatives.

View [GAO-14-829T](#). For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham, Ph. D. at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

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AVIATION MANUFACTURING

Status of FAA's Efforts to Improve Certification and Regulatory Consistency

What GAO Found

The Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Aircraft Certification Service (Aircraft Certification) is responsible for addressing the certification and approval process recommendations, and has made progress. Aircraft Certification is implementing and has set milestones for completing 14 initiatives, several of which were originally begun as part of earlier certification process improvement efforts. The initiatives range from developing a comprehensive road map for major change initiatives, to improving Aircraft Certification's process for prioritizing requests for certifications and approvals (project sequencing), to reorganizing the small aircraft certification regulation. According to an update prepared by FAA in May 2014, one initiative has been completed and most are on track to be completed within 3 years. However, according to this update, two initiatives will not meet planned milestones, including the one for improving FAA's program for delegating authority to organizations to carry out some certification activities. Also, a third initiative for improving consistency of regulatory interpretation was at risk of not meeting planned milestones. Two additional initiatives, while on track for meeting planned milestones in May 2014, faced challenges because of opposition by FAA's labor unions, including one for improving Aircraft Certification's project sequencing process. GAO found in October 2013 that Aircraft Certification continued to lack performance measures for many of these initiatives, a condition that persists. In 2010, GAO had previously recommended that FAA develop a continuous evaluative process with performance goals and measures. FAA agreed but has not yet fully addressed the recommendation. Aircraft Certification officials discussed plans to develop metrics in three phases, beginning in July 2014 and in the future, for measuring (1) the progress of implementing the initiatives throughout FAA, (2) the outcomes of each initiative, and (3) the return on investment for FAA and the industry resulting from implementing the initiatives as a whole.

FAA's Flight Standards Service (Flight Standards) is responsible for addressing the regulatory consistency recommendations, and is finalizing plans to do so. FAA has not published a detailed plan with milestones and performance metrics, and officials told GAO that they intend to publish a plan by August 2014. Flight Standards officials said they were making progress in addressing the committee's top priority recommendation—mapping all FAA policy and guidance to relevant federal aviation regulations and developing an electronic system that maintains this information and that is accessible by FAA and industry users. As part of this effort, officials told GAO that Flight Standards has begun eliminating obsolete guidance and linking existing policy and guidance to the regulations.

Going forward, Aircraft Certification's and Flight Standards' efforts may face challenges that could affect successful implementation of the committees' recommendations. Many of these recommendations represent a significant shift in how FAA normally conducts business, and if the workforce is reluctant to implement such changes, FAA's planned initiatives for addressing the recommendations could be delayed. Also, the fact that FAA has not yet implemented performance measures for most of the initiatives is a concern for both GAO and the industry. As GAO concluded in October 2013, without performance measures, FAA will be unable to gather the appropriate data to evaluate the success of current and future initiatives.