



Highlights of GAO-05-144, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Homeland Security, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives.

GENERAL AVIATION SECURITY

Increased Federal Oversight Is Needed, but Continued Partnership with the Private Sector Is Critical to Long-Term Success

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal intelligence agencies have reported that in the past, terrorists have considered using general aviation aircraft (all aviation other than commercial and military) for terrorist acts, and that the September 11th terrorists learned to fly at general aviation flight schools. The questions GAO answered regarding the status of general aviation security included (1) What actions has the federal government taken to identify and assess threats to, and vulnerabilities of, general aviation; and communicate that information to stakeholders? (2) What steps has the federal government taken to strengthen general aviation security, and what, if any, challenges does the government face; and (3) What steps have non-federal stakeholders taken to enhance the security of general aviation?

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) develop a plan for implementing a risk management approach to strengthen general aviation security, and that the Federal Aviation Administration establish a documented process to review and revalidate flight restrictions.

TSA and FAA generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

What GAO Found

The federal and state governments and general aviation industry all play a role in securing general aviation operations. While the federal government provides guidance, enforces regulatory requirements, and provides some funding, the bulk of the responsibility for assessing and enhancing security falls on airport operators. Although TSA has issued a limited threat assessment of general aviation, and the FBI identified that terrorists have considered using general aviation to conduct attacks, a systematic assessment of threats has not been conducted. In addition, to assess airport vulnerabilities, TSA plans to issue a self-assessment tool for airport operators' use, but it does not plan to conduct on-site vulnerability assessments at all general aviation airports due to the cost and vastness of the general aviation network. Instead, TSA intends to use a systematic and analytical risk management process, which is considered a best practice, to assess the threats and vulnerabilities of general aviation. However, TSA has not yet developed an implementation plan for its risk management efforts.

TSA and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have taken steps to address security risks to general aviation through regulation and guidance, but still face challenges in their efforts to further enhance security. For example, TSA has promulgated regulations requiring background checks of foreign candidates for U.S. flight training schools and has issued security guidelines for general aviation airports. However, we found limitations in the process used to conduct compliance inspections of flight training programs. In addition, FAA, in coordination with TSA and other federal agencies, has implemented airspace restrictions over certain landmarks and special events. However, FAA has not established written policies or procedures for reviewing and revalidating the need for flight restrictions that limit access to airspace for indefinite periods of time and could negatively affect the general aviation industry.

Non-federal general aviation stakeholders have partnered with the federal government and have individually taken steps to enhance general aviation security. For example, industry associations developed best practices and recommendations for securing general aviation, and have partnered with TSA to develop security initiatives such as the Airport Watch Program, similar to a neighborhood watch program. Some state governments have also provided funding for enhancing security at general aviation airports, and many airport operators GAO surveyed took steps to enhance security such as installing fencing and increasing police patrols.

Examples of General Aviation Aircraft

General aviation aircraft		
 (1) charter airliner similar in size to airliner used by commercial airlines	 (2) helicopter for law enforcement, medical, and private use	 (3) personal use aircraft

Source: GAO and Nova Development Corporation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-144.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cathleen Berrick, 202-512-8777, Berrickc@gao.gov.