



Highlights of [GAO-09-377T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

As requested, this statement discusses issues for the reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The aviation industry is in a period of economic turmoil and faces an uncertain future. At the same time, FAA is undertaking one of its most ambitious efforts ever to transform the nation's air traffic control system. The reauthorization of FAA provides an opportunity for Congress and FAA to focus on several key issues to improve the national airspace system.

This statement is based on recent and ongoing work and on discussions with selected senior FAA officials and representatives of the aviation industry. This work was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that GAO plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for findings and conclusions based on the audit objectives. GAO believes that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for the findings and conclusions based on the audit objectives. A list of related GAO products is included at the end of this statement.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made prior recommendations to address some of these issues. FAA has begun to address GAO's recommendations, although some have not yet been fully implemented.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-377T](#). For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham, Ph.D., at (202) 512-2834 or [dillingham@gao.gov](mailto:dillingham@gao.gov).

## NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM

### FAA Reauthorization Issues Are Critical to System Transformation and Operations

#### What GAO Found

This statement discusses six issues that are important in reauthorizing FAA programs. Many of these issues are deeply intertwined, and addressing one can affect the others. Balancing all of these issues will be a challenge, but is essential to FAA's ability to transform and operate the national airspace system safely and efficiently.

***Ensuring the safe and efficient transformation to the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen).*** FAA will need to accelerate the implementation of new and existing technologies, consider incentives for airlines to acquire those technologies, reconfigure facilities and enhance runways to take full advantage of NextGen's benefits, and sustain the current system while transitioning to the new one.

***Strengthening oversight of aviation safety.*** Incomplete and inaccurate safety data jeopardize FAA's implementation of a new safety management approach. In addition, improvement of runway and ramp safety oversight is a key issue. For example, last year there were 25 incidents when collisions between aircraft on runways were narrowly avoided.

***Reducing congestion and providing access to the national airspace system.*** FAA has taken steps to enhance capacity and reduce delays, such as redesigning airspace and placing caps on operations, but progress and improvements have been limited. Even as some areas experience more congestion, however, other areas of the country have seen service decline. This may increase demand for the Department of Transportation's subsidy program to provide a minimal level of scheduled air service for certain small communities.

***Addressing aviation's impact on the environment.*** FAA, airports, and other stakeholders have worked to reduce noise, emissions, and other pollutants. Further efforts will be needed, particularly when trying to expand airport capacity.

***Ensuring a sufficient, trained workforce.*** FAA faces a retiring air traffic controller workforce, the need for additional technical expertise to implement NextGen, and the need to improve relations with its labor unions.

***Ensuring timely reauthorization of FAA programs.*** Short-term funding extensions and continuing resolutions could delay key capital projects. Timely reauthorization is critical to sustaining FAA's current programs and advancing NextGen.

FAA reviewed a draft of this statement and provided technical corrections, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.