

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-285T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. air transportation system is the busiest and among the safest in the world. Even so, maintaining and improving the extraordinary level of connectivity and mobility the system affords us, and the safety record that has been achieved to date requires continued attention and effort. In the 2012 Act, Congress directed FAA to take various actions to improve the safety and efficiency of the current NAS while transitioning to NextGen. In addition, given the potential and opportunities afforded by new UAS technologies, the 2012 Act included several provisions with respect to FAA safely integrating UAS into the NAS.

Based on work GAO has conducted for this Committee since the passage of the 2012 Act, this testimony discusses FAA's challenges and progress in

- 1) implementing NextGen,
- 2) improving aviation safety, and
- 3) integrating UAS into the national airspace system.

This statement is drawn from several GAO reports completed since the 2012 Act, as well as additional reports from prior to the 2012 Act on these topics. To update information in those reports, GAO conducted interviews with officials from FAA and industry, and reviewed agency documents.

View [GAO-14-285T](#). For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham at (202) 512-2834 or [dillinghamg@gao.gov](mailto:dillinghamg@gao.gov).

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## FAA REAUTHORIZATION ACT

### Progress and Challenges Implementing Various Provisions of the 2012 Act

## What GAO Found

The FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (the 2012 Act) contained several provisions related to implementing the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen)—a complex, long-term initiative to incrementally modernize and transform the national airspace system (NAS). GAO's recent work on NextGen has highlighted three key implementation issues:

- *Improving NextGen Leadership:* Complex transformations, such as NextGen, require substantial leadership commitment over a sustained period, and leaders must both be empowered to make critical decisions and be held accountable for results. The 2012 Act created a Chief NextGen Officer that FAA appointed in June 2013, and FAA has recently filled other key NextGen leadership positions. With these positions filled, FAA should be in a better position to resolve its NextGen leadership challenges.
- *Demonstrating Near-Term Benefits:* The 2012 Act included a number of provisions aimed at accelerating the creation of performance-based navigation (PBN) procedures, such as following precise routes that use the Global Positioning System, which can save airlines and other aircraft operators money through reduced fuel burn and flight time. FAA must continue to deliver PBN capabilities and begin to demonstrate a return on operator's investments. As of January 2014, FAA has implemented PBN procedures at two of the five airports selected for early deployment.
- *Balancing the Needs of the Current Air-Traffic Control System and NextGen:* While the 2012 Act contained a number of provisions aimed at accelerating NextGen implementation, GAO found that FAA's budget planning does not fully account for the impact on the agency's operating costs of the NextGen systems that will be deployed in future years, along with the need for continued operation and maintenance of existing systems and facilities. Cost estimates for maintaining existing systems and facilities coupled with implementing NextGen exceed anticipated funding levels. GAO recommended improvements to FAA's budget-planning and infrastructure-condition data, which FAA is working to implement.

Safety in the aviation industry is achieved in part through adherence to various certification standards. The 2012 Act required FAA to work with industry to assess the certification process. GAO's work has found that while FAA has made progress developing its plan to implement these recommendations, FAA continues to lack performance measures to track its progress.

For unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), FAA has implemented 7 of the 17 requirements established in the 2012 Act, representing progress since GAO's last update in January 2013. However, FAA continues to experience challenges implementing the provisions in the 2012 Act and integrating UAS into the NAS. For example, although FAA has had efforts under way since 2008 supporting a rulemaking on small UAS, it is unlikely that FAA will meet the August 2014 final rule deadline required by the 2012 Act since it has not yet issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. In addition, while FAA created the UAS Integration Office in 2013 to lead UAS integration, as of January 2014, the program lacks an operations budget.