

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-566](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

NOAA's aircraft play a critical role in collecting scientific data to help NOAA advance understanding of changes in the environment and manage ocean and coastal resources. NOAA uses its aircraft for a wide range of scientific missions. In fiscal year 2013, NOAA's aircraft flew hundreds of flights and logged about 3,900 flight hours. NOAA officials predict that expanding mission needs will lead to increased demand for aircraft services. To address such challenges, NOAA has been working to improve its capital asset planning and management for aircraft.

A House committee report on the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013, mandated GAO to examine various issues regarding NOAA's aircraft. This report examines (1) the status of NOAA's efforts to improve its aircraft planning and management and the extent to which these efforts reflect leading practices and (2) challenges NOAA faces in improving its aircraft asset planning and management. GAO analyzed aircraft cost and flight hour data from fiscal year 2004 through fiscal year 2013, reviewed agency planning and management documents, and interviewed agency officials. GAO reviewed capital asset planning guidance from OMB to identify leading practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the NOAA Administrator ensure that the agency links and integrates its multiple planning efforts as it finalizes a comprehensive capital asset plan for aircraft. NOAA concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-14-566](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or FennellA@gao.gov.

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NOAA AIRCRAFT

Aging Fleet and Future Challenges Underscore the Need for a Capital Asset Plan

What GAO Found

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) within the Department of Commerce has 34 efforts aimed at improving its aircraft asset planning and management, some of which are ongoing, while others are under way or planned; however, because these efforts are not yet fully implemented, it is too early to determine whether they will reflect the leading practices in capital asset management that have been identified by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Among NOAA's initiatives are efforts to enhance its process for scheduling aircraft use among NOAA offices and to develop new aircraft performance metrics. NOAA's efforts also include the development of multiple long-term plans that together are intended to constitute a capital asset plan for aircraft. OMB leading practices encourage agencies to have capital asset plans—which help provide agencies with information and analysis to make long-term decisions about acquiring and managing capital assets—as a part of their strategic planning efforts, but NOAA currently does not have such a plan for its aircraft. NOAA expects to complete its various improvement efforts related to aircraft asset planning and management by fiscal year 2017.

Examples of NOAA Aircraft

Lockheed P-3 Orion



de Havilland Twin Otter



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. | GAO-14-566

NOAA faces challenges in improving its aircraft asset planning and management. NOAA's complex approach to creating a capital asset plan for aircraft may present challenges because it will comprise multiple stand-alone plans, and critical planning information and analysis on different types of assets will be spread across different documents. NOAA is in the early stages of some of these planning efforts and has not yet determined how, or whether, it will link and integrate the plans with one another to ensure that they will serve as a comprehensive plan. NOAA has faced challenges in finalizing a capital planning effort in the past. In 2009, NOAA leadership suspended a planning effort intended to address the agency's future aircraft needs in order to incorporate additional aircraft-related information, according to NOAA officials; the agency subsequently began its current planning effort 4 years later, in 2013. The importance of a capital asset plan is underscored by the significant decisions NOAA faces regarding its aircraft fleet, particularly its two operating P-3 Orion aircraft that are in high demand for hurricane work (see fig.). For example, given that the P-3 Orion aircraft are nearly 40 years old, NOAA faces decisions on whether to invest in additional costly service life extensions or replace the aircraft. Linking and integrating its multiple planning efforts could help NOAA demonstrate that it has a capital asset plan consistent with OMB guidance. Without a capital asset plan in place, NOAA risks making decisions that will not allow the agency to effectively address future challenges.