

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-527T](#), a testimony before Subcommittee on Airland, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, the size, sophistication, and cost of the Department of Defense's (DOD) UAS portfolio has grown considerably, as has the demand for trained UAS pilots.

This testimony discusses, among other things, DOD's progress in (1) taking actions to strengthen the management of Air Force UAS pilots and (2) addressing challenges the Army faces to ensure that its UAS pilots complete their required training and receive high-quality training.

GAO's statement is based on information from its reports issued in April 2014 on the Air Force UAS pilots and May 2015 on Army and Air Force UAS pilot training. For those reports, GAO reviewed DOD guidance on training UAS pilots and other relevant documents, examined nongeneralizable training records of Air Force UAS units, conducted nongeneralizable focus groups with active duty UAS pilots who were selected to cover a range of ranks and other factors at 6 installations, and interviewed DOD and military services officials. GAO obtained updates from DOD and military services officials for this statement.

What GAO Recommends

In April 2014 and May 2015, GAO made ten recommendations to DOD to improve the Air Force's management of UAS pilots, address Army UAS pilot training challenges, and enhance DOD coordination of UAS pilot training. DOD initiated action on most of these recommendations.

View [GAO-16-527T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

March 16, 2016

UNMANNED AERIAL SYSTEMS

Further Actions Needed to Fully Address Air Force and Army Pilot Workforce Challenges

What GAO Found

In April 2014, GAO reported on several issues the Air Force faced in managing its UAS pilots, and while the Air Force has taken some actions since then, it has not fully implemented GAO's recommendations to strengthen its management.

- **Personnel Requirements:** GAO reported that the Air Force had not accurately identified the number of UAS pilots required to accomplish its mission nor had it established a minimum number of pilots needed. As of March 2016, the Air Force had not updated personnel requirements and until it does, the Air Force will not know if it is assuming unacceptable levels of risk to accomplishing the mission and ensuring pilot safety.
- **Recruiting and Retaining:** GAO reported that the Air Force had faced challenges recruiting UAS pilots and might also face retention challenges in the future. The Air Force has taken steps to recruit more UAS pilots and offers a monthly assignment incentive pay to help retain pilots, but issues related to recruiting UAS pilots may warrant the Air Force's attention.
- **Alternative Sources:** GAO reported that the Air Force had not evaluated the use of alternative personnel populations such as enlisted or civilian personnel to help it sustain required UAS pilot staffing levels. In 2015, the Air Force announced it would test using enlisted personnel but has not formally evaluated using DOD civilian personnel as UAS pilots and thus may lack information on potential options for meeting personnel requirements.
- **Training:** GAO reported that the Air Force had faced challenges training its UAS pilots due to UAS pilot shortages, which impacted its ability to produce new pilots. Fully implementing GAO's recommendations pertaining to management of UAS pilots would better position the Air Force to address its training challenges.
- **Promotions:** GAO reported that the Air Force monitors the promotion rates of UAS pilots but had not analyzed factors that may relate to their low promotion rates. Until the Air Force does this analysis, it is unclear whether its actions to raise promotion rates are appropriate.

The Army has initiated steps to address challenges related to UAS pilots completing their required training and its use of less experienced instructors, which could affect training quality. In May 2015, GAO found that Army unit status reports did not require UAS pilot training information, and thus the Army did not know the extent pilots had been trained and were ready to deploy. GAO recommended that the Army require unit status reports to include UAS pilot readiness information. In March 2016, officials stated that the Army had taken steps to implement the recommendation, but its efforts are ongoing and thus it is too early to know their impact. Also, the Army had waived course prerequisites for about 40 percent of the UAS pilots attending a course to become instructor pilots from the beginning of fiscal year 2013 through February 2015. As a result, Army UAS pilots may not have been receiving the highest caliber of training to prepare them for UAS missions. GAO recommended in May 2015 that the Army mitigate risks posed by waiving prerequisites for less experienced UAS pilots, and in March 2016, Army officials stated that they have addressed the underlying causes that led it to waive the prerequisites, but they did not provide information for GAO to be able to determine whether they were continuing to waive these prerequisites.