

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-154](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Demand for commercial space launches is anticipated to increase in the coming years. FAA, the agency responsible for overseeing the sites where these launches occur, was directed by statute to submit a report—and update it every 2 years until December 2024—that makes recommendations on how to facilitate and promote greater investments in space transportation infrastructure.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 included a provision for GAO to review issues related to space transportation infrastructure. This report discusses launch providers' and site operators' views on the sufficiency of infrastructure in meeting market demand and assesses the steps FAA has taken to identify options for federal support of space transportation infrastructure, among other things. GAO reviewed relevant regulations; assessed FAA's actions against GAO-identified leading practices; and interviewed FAA officials, commercial launch providers, and representatives from U.S. commercial launch sites that GAO identified as having hosted an FAA-licensed launch since 2015 or having an FAA launch site operator license as of August 2020.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAA examine a range of potential options to support space transportation infrastructure and that this examination include a discussion of trade-offs. DOT partially concurred, noting that it would provide its mandated report to Congress but not conduct a new examination of a range of options. GAO continues to believe that such an examination is warranted.

View [GAO-21-154](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-2834 or KrauseH@gao.gov.

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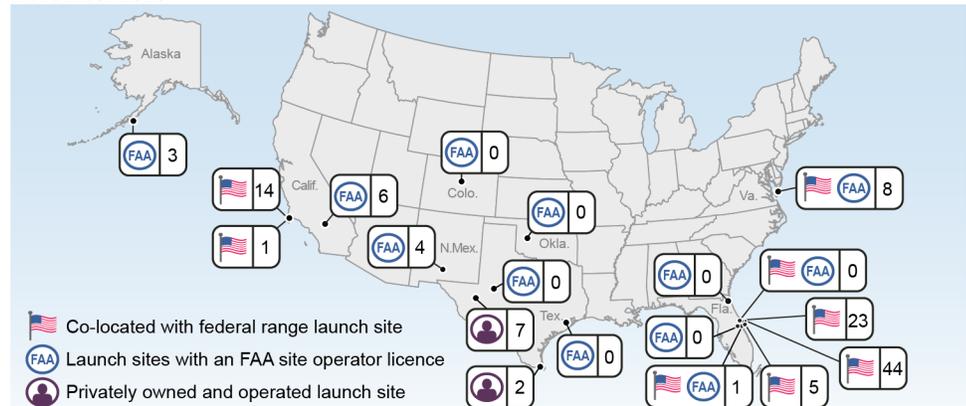
COMMERCIAL SPACE TRANSPORTATION

FAA Should Examine a Range of Options to Support U.S. Launch Infrastructure

What GAO Found

Launch providers support the deployment of people and payloads, such as national security and commercial satellites or research probes, into space. The majority of these providers told GAO that U.S. space transportation infrastructure—located at sites across the country—is generally sufficient for them to meet their customers' current requirements. This situation is in part a result of the launch providers' investments in launch sites, along with state and local funding. Launch providers and site operators alike seek future improvements but differ on the type and location of infrastructure required. Some launch providers said that infrastructure improvements would be required to increase launch capacity at existing busy launch sites, while a few site operators said that new infrastructure and additional launch sites would help expand the nation's overall launch capacity.

U.S. Commercial Launch Sites with Number of FAA-Licensed Launches, January 2015 - November 2020



Sources: GAO analysis of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data and Map Resources. | GAO-21-154

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was directed by statute to make recommendations to Congress on how to facilitate and promote greater investments in space transportation infrastructure, among other things. However, FAA's initial draft report was limited because it focused only on two existing FAA programs, rather than a range of options. FAA officials stated that they did not examine other options because of limited time and resources, and that the two identified programs could be implemented quickly because FAA has administrative authority to manage them. Leading practices in infrastructure investment emphasize the importance of conducting an examination of potential approaches, which can help identify how best to support national interests; avoid overlap or duplication of federal effort; and enhance, not substitute, participation by non-federal stakeholders. An examination may also help identify alternatives to making funding available, such as increasing efficiency and capacity through technology improvements. By focusing only on these existing programs, FAA may overlook other options that better meet federal policy goals and maximize the effect of any federal investment. Although FAA has already prepared its initial report to respond to the statute, it still has opportunities, such as during subsequent mandated updates, to report separately on potential approaches.