

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107334](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Aviation is critical for the delivery of high-value, perishable, and time-sensitive goods, like pharmaceuticals. Air cargo depends on ground-based infrastructure such as warehouses and roadways to operate efficiently. During the pandemic, cargo congestion and delays at some airports raised questions about the ability of U.S. air cargo infrastructure to support the efficient movement of goods.

GAO was asked to review air cargo trends, challenges, and federal activities. This report (1) evaluates the extent to which DOT has assessed reliability and communicated any limitations of air cargo data, (2) describes challenges selected stakeholders reported, and (3) assesses the extent to which DOT has identified and addressed air cargo challenges, among other objectives.

GAO selected a nongeneralizable sample of 37 air cargo stakeholders, like carriers and ground handlers, across 11 airports that handled 38 percent of 2023 cargo volume, and conducted semi-structured interviews with them about challenges and federal interactions. GAO observed air cargo infrastructure and operations at nine airports and 28 warehouses. GAO also reviewed DOT air cargo data and documents and interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT (1) assess and communicate air cargo data limitations; and (2) evaluate existing information and routinely communicate with stakeholders to identify, and determine if DOT needs to help address, air cargo challenges. DOT agreed with GAO's recommendations.

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AIR CARGO

DOT Should Communicate Data Limitations and Identify Stakeholder Challenges

What GAO Found

The Department of Transportation (DOT) is responsible for ensuring the safe and efficient movement of goods, including air cargo. DOT is also responsible for collecting data on air cargo movements and infrastructure locations. While GAO found that some DOT air cargo data were sufficient to describe changes in volume, DOT has not assessed or communicated the reliability of other air cargo data. For example, GAO found that DOT's Freight Analysis Framework air cargo estimates were not sufficient to describe changes in air cargo value and commodities. In addition, DOT has not fully assessed the reliability or communicated the limitations of these estimates. Without doing so, stakeholders may not use the data appropriately for important purposes such as infrastructure planning and incident response.

Selected air cargo stakeholders reported common challenges with ground-based air cargo infrastructure and operations. More than two-thirds of the 37 stakeholders GAO interviewed reported challenges with warehouses, truck areas, and roadways across 11 selected airports. Stakeholders most frequently reported challenges associated with older warehouses, which slowed operations. GAO visited warehouses that were at least 40 years old at four of the nine airports GAO visited, and observed narrow or obstructed space, blocked doors, and low ceilings. Many stakeholders also reported that a lack of truck areas and poorly configured roadways slowed operations and led to safety hazards.

Example of Roadway Congestion Caused by a Truck Docking at an Air Cargo Warehouse



Source: GAO photo. | GAO-25-107334

DOT's recently established Office of Multimodal Freight Infrastructure and Policy (Multimodal Freight Office)—which is statutorily required to identify infrastructure improvements and policies to reduce freight congestion—has not taken steps to identify and address air cargo challenges. Specifically, the Multimodal Freight Office has not used existing information, such as freight plans that states share with DOT, to identify challenges. Additionally, the office has not communicated with air cargo stakeholders to understand challenges they face. Doing so would help DOT determine whether it needs to act to help address challenges. Multimodal Freight Office officials said they intended to reach out to freight stakeholders, including for air cargo, within the next year as part of other ongoing efforts.