

FAA Should Take Steps to Ensure Oversight Efforts
Address Increased Workload

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A report to congressional committees

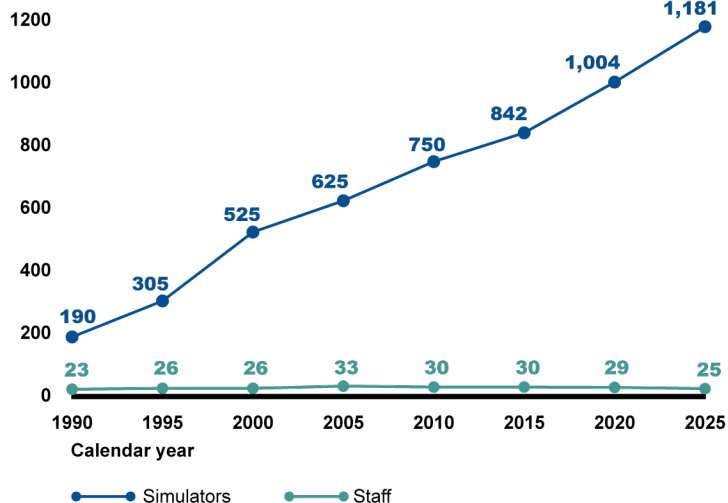
Contact: Derrick Collins at collinsd@gao.gov

What GAO Found

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) uses the National Simulator Program (NSP) to evaluate and oversee an increasing number of flight simulators. NSP's oversight ensures that simulators accurately replicate the aircraft they simulate. From 1990 to 2025, the number of simulators increased by more than 500 percent, while the number of NSP staff remained steady. From 2019 through 2024, the number and type of simulator evaluations that NSP conducted remained relatively steady, as NSP implemented the Extended Evaluation Interval (EEI) program, among other strategies, to oversee the growing number of simulators. This program allows FAA to extend intervals between evaluations—from the standard 12 months up to 36 months—for simulators that demonstrate consistent, high-quality performance.

Trends in the Number of Simulators Under Federal Aviation Administration Oversight and National Simulator Program Staff, 1990–2025

Number of flight simulators under FAA oversight and NSP staff



Source: National Simulator Program data. | GAO-26-107726

However, GAO found that NSP has not communicated with simulator sponsors about its process for determining simulators' eligibility for the EEI program and the intervals between evaluations of simulators in the program. Six of 10 selected sponsors raised concerns about communication, including insufficient opportunity to provide information that could help improve EEI determinations. For example, two sponsors cited potential safety issues that could result from extending the intervals between evaluations. Communicating with sponsors could help NSP make more informed decisions about eligibility and evaluation intervals, and identify and address risks associated with those determinations.

GAO found that NSP has identified staffing and skills gaps but has not addressed all mission-critical skills gaps, including in standards development. Developing and implementing a process to address all identified mission-critical skills gaps would help NSP ensure its staff has the requisite skills to keep pace with evolving technology while handling an increased oversight workload.

Why GAO Did This Study

NSP plays a critical role in aviation safety, as it oversees the flight simulators that airlines and flight schools use to train pilots to operate aircraft in a variety of situations.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 includes a provision for GAO to review FAA's oversight of simulators. This report examines, among other objectives, how the number and type of simulator evaluations NSP conducts annually has changed in recent years, and how NSP has addressed increased demand; the extent to which NSP has communicated with sponsors in its process for making EEI program determinations; and the extent to which NSP has identified and addressed gaps in staffing levels and staff skill sets.

GAO reviewed FAA policies, guidance, and data, as well as relevant federal laws and regulations. GAO also interviewed FAA officials and simulator sponsors, such as major and regional airlines. For these interviews, GAO selected a nongeneralizable sample of 10 sponsors that own or operate over 62 percent of all flight simulators. In addition, GAO conducted two site visits to observe simulators managed by a flight simulator manufacturer and a flight training organization.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAA develop and implement a mechanism to communicate with and receive feedback from sponsors about its process for determining which simulators are eligible for inclusion in the EEI program, and develop and implement a process to address all identified mission-critical skills gaps. The Department of Transportation concurred with the recommendations.