

A report to congressional committees

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What GAO Found

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the airline industry faced challenges filling pilot vacancies, which network and low-cost airlines addressed by hiring from regional airlines, according to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Those regional pilots' departures contributed to reductions in regional airline service to small communities, according to selected stakeholders. For example, one network airline told GAO that in 2022 it had to withdraw regional air service from 29 airports, many of which serve small communities. Several trends—like increased airline operating costs and travelers driving to their destination or to a larger airport—have also contributed to the decrease in regional air service to small airports and communities over the last 20 years, according to GAO's prior work.

Data and selected stakeholders indicate that pilot supply has been rebounding in recent years. From 2017 through 2024, for example, pilot certifications grew about 10 percent, with most of the increase starting in 2021. In 2024, pilot hiring slowed at the network and low-cost airlines, in part due to aircraft delivery delays, according to selected stakeholders. This hiring slowdown may have allowed regional airlines to retain pilots and move toward pre-pandemic staffing levels. In addition, regional airlines significantly increased pay to attract and retain pilots, raising the average hourly rate for a first-year first officer from about \$52 an hour in 2021 to about \$93 an hour in 2024.

To help strengthen the pilot pipeline, the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 required FAA to take action on two pilot training initiatives by November 2024.

- **Enhanced Qualification Program (EQP).** Requires FAA to establish requirements so that qualified air carriers, among others, may provide enhanced training based on a nationally standardized curriculum that includes instruction on airline operations and procedures for eligible pilots seeking a restricted-privileges airline transport pilot certificate.
- **Nationwide office for Designated Pilot Examiners (DPE).** Requires FAA to establish a nationwide oversight office and to submit reports to congressional committees evaluating the use of DPEs—experienced pilots designated by the FAA to conduct tests with student pilots.

Industry stakeholders told GAO that progress on both initiatives could expedite pilot training.

In February 2026, FAA officials told GAO the agency has established EQP requirements internally and set up the DPE national oversight office and has begun oversight. FAA officials said that additional time is needed to complete internal processes before issuing the EQP requirements and the DPE report and that no timelines have been established for issuing either.

Establishing and publicly communicating the timelines for issuing the EQP and DPE products would inform external stakeholders—including Congress—of FAA's plans for meeting the requirements in the FAA Reauthorization Act. Having this timeline information would also help industry stakeholders, such as aviation schools, prepare to support these initiatives and enhance FAA transparency and accountability.

Why GAO Did This Study

Commercial airline pilots, including regional airline pilots, play a crucial role in facilitating economic activity by ensuring safe and efficient air travel. As in many other highly specialized fields, becoming a commercial airline pilot takes years of training and experience.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 includes a provision for GAO to review the supply of regional airline pilots. This report examines (1) how pilot supply and other factors affected regional airline service during the post-pandemic recovery, according to selected stakeholders; and (2) what the available data and stakeholders indicate about the current and future supply of regional airline pilots.

GAO analyzed FAA pilot certification data, Department of Transportation data on regional pilot employment, and data from the Air Line Pilots Association on hourly pay rates for first-year regional airline pilots. GAO interviewed FAA officials to obtain perspectives on pilot supply and agency actions. GAO also interviewed representatives from a nongeneralizable sample of 29 aviation stakeholders, such as network and regional airlines, collegiate aviation schools, and industry associations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAA establish and publicly communicate timelines for issuing (1) the Enhanced Qualification Program requirements and (2) the first required report for the Designated Pilot Examiner's national office. DOT concurred with the recommendations.