

Highlights of [GAO-08-258](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The National Weather Service’s (NWS) weather products are a vital component of the Federal Aviation Administration’s (FAA) air traffic control system. In addition to providing aviation weather products developed at its own facilities, NWS also provides staff on-site at each of FAA’s en route centers (see fig.). This group of NWS meteorologists—called a center weather service unit—provides air traffic managers with forecasts and briefings on regional conditions including turbulence, icing, and freezing precipitation.

GAO agreed to (1) determine the status of NWS’s plans for restructuring the offices that provide aviation weather services at FAA’s en route centers, (2) identify FAA’s requirements and its alternative sources for these services, and (3) evaluate both agencies’ current abilities to ensure the consistency and quality of these services. To do so, GAO evaluated agency plans for restructuring offices, defining requirements, and ensuring quality products, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that Commerce and Transportation define performance measures for aviation weather services and evaluate the quality of these services. Commerce agreed with the recommendations. Transportation did not agree or disagree with the recommendations, but stated that its just-released requirements include performance measures and evaluation procedures.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-258](#). For more information, contact David Pownner at (202) 512-9286 or pownner@gao.gov.

AVIATION WEATHER

FAA Is Reevaluating Services at Key Centers; Both FAA and the National Weather Service Need to Better Ensure Product Quality

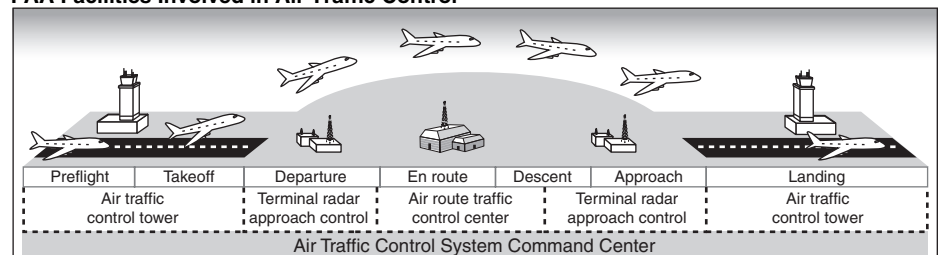
What GAO Found

NWS developed a proposal for restructuring the offices that provide aviation weather services at FAA’s en route centers, but these plans are currently on hold. In 2005, FAA requested that NWS restructure its center weather service units by consolidating offices, providing remote services, and reducing personnel costs. In response, NWS conducted a prototype that demonstrated that the services the center weather service units currently provide could be provided remotely by the closest weather forecast office. It subsequently proposed to implement this prototype, but FAA declined this proposal. NWS may reconsider its proposal or other alternative organizational structures as it works to meet FAA’s needs in the future.

FAA considers its existing requirements governing the center weather service units to be too broad to ensure the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the services, so the agency worked for several months to redefine its requirements. By September 2007, FAA had developed draft requirements that specified the products and services to be performed by meteorologists at the en route center, including conducting weather briefings and developing local icing and turbulence forecasts. FAA finalized a more expansive set of requirements at the end of December 2007, and expects NWS to respond within 120 days on its ability to fulfill the requirements. FAA has stated that, if NWS is unable to meet the requirements, it will consider using alternative sources such as private industry or government laboratories to meet the requirements.

Although interagency agreements between NWS and FAA state that both agencies have responsibilities for assuring and controlling the quality of aviation weather observations, neither agency consistently does so for weather products and services produced at the en route centers. Specifically, neither agency has developed performance measures and metrics, regularly evaluated weather service unit performance, or provided feedback to improve these aviation weather products and services. Because of this lack of performance tracking and oversight, NWS cannot demonstrate the quality or value of its services, and FAA cannot ensure the quality of the services it funds. Until both agencies are able to measure and ensure the quality of the aviation weather products at the en route centers, FAA may not be getting the information it needs to effectively manage air traffic.

FAA Facilities Involved in Air Traffic Control



Source: GAO analysis of FAA data.