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FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION

Plan Still Needed to Meet Challenges to Effectively Managing Air Traffic Controller Workforce

Why GAO Did This Study

In the summer of 2000, the air traffic control system lacked the capacity to handle demand efficiently, and flight delays produced near-gridlock conditions at several U.S. airports. A combination of factors, including the crises instigated by the events of 9/11, temporarily reduced air traffic, but air traffic is now back to near pre-9/11 levels. The ability of the air traffic control system to handle expected traffic in coming years may depend in part on the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) effectiveness in planning for a long-expected wave of air traffic controller retirements.

GAO's testimony focuses on (1) the magnitude and timing of the pending wave of air traffic controller retirements, (2) the challenges FAA faces in ensuring that well-qualified air traffic controllers are ready to step into the gap created by the expected large number of retirements, and (3) challenges that will affect the ability of the air traffic controller workforce to meet future changes in the airline industry and use of airspace. GAO's statement is based on past reports on the air traffic controller workforce, including GAO's 2002 report that surveyed controllers and analyzed controller workforce data. GAO has updated this work through interviews with and the collection of data from key stakeholders in the aviation community. This work was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO 04-887T.

To view the full testimony, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Hecker, (202) 512-2834 or heckerj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

FAA faces a bow wave of thousands of air traffic controller retirements over the coming decade. GAO's 2002 report warned that almost half of the controller workforce (about 7,000 controllers) would retire over the next 10 years and about 93 percent of controller supervisors would be eligible to retire by the end of 2011. In addition, GAO's analysis showed that retirements could increase dramatically at the busiest air traffic control facilities. FAA and the Department of Transportation's Inspector General have also reported that a surge in controller retirements is on the way.

Past and Projected Air Traffic Controller Retirement Eligibility, by Fiscal Year (2002 Report)

Number and percentage of staff becoming eligible

Fiscal year
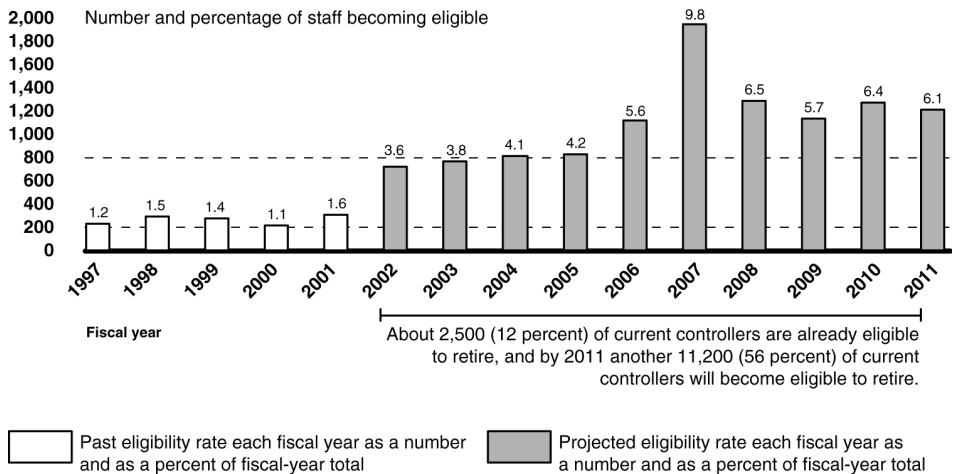
About 2,500 (12 percent) of current controllers are already eligible to retire, and by 2011 another 11,200 (56 percent) of current controllers will become eligible to retire.

☐ Past eligibility rate each fiscal year as a number and as a percent of fiscal-year total

▨ Projected eligibility rate each fiscal year as a number and as a percent of fiscal-year total

FAA faces numerous hiring and training challenges to ensuring that well-qualified controllers are ready to fill the gap created by the expected retirements. For example, it can take 2-4 years or more to certify new controllers, and FAA's training facility and air traffic control facilities, where years of on-the-job training occur, have limited capacity. While FAA must make hiring decisions from a long-term perspective, it has generally hired replacements only after a current controller leaves. In 2002, GAO recommended that FAA develop a comprehensive workforce plan to deal with these challenges. However, FAA has not finalized a plan, and its recent actions call into question whether it has adequate strategies to address these challenges. For example, since the beginning of this year, FAA lost nearly 400 controllers and has hired only 1 new controller. Its fiscal year 2005 budget proposal does not request any funding to hire additional controllers.

Challenges will also affect the ability of the air traffic controller workforce to meet future changes in the airline industry and use of airspace. Challenges include the need for FAA to overcome management problems with acquiring systems to modernize the air traffic control system and to adjust to shifts in the use of airspace, including increases in the use of smaller aircraft and changes in air traffic patterns around the country.

United States General Accounting Office