



Highlights of [GAO-09-37](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, Congress established a program to reduce airport ground emissions at commercial service airports in areas failing to meet or maintain air quality standards. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) administers the Voluntary Airport Low Emissions (VALE) Program and oversees the program's two sources of funding: Airport Improvement Program (AIP) federal grants or Passenger Facility Charges (PFC), which airports can collect from passengers. Participating airports also receive credits for the emission reductions achieved through VALE projects in accordance with the law and guidance. Airports can use these credits to offset emissions resulting from development projects to comply with federal Clean Air Act requirements.

GAO was asked to determine (1) how the VALE program has been implemented, including airport participation levels, types of projects, and program expenditures, and (2) the outcomes attributable to the VALE program. To do this, GAO reviewed FAA data on VALE projects for all nine participating airports; visited two of these airports; obtained information from the remaining seven participating airports and four nonparticipating airports; and interviewed officials from FAA, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and airport associations. FAA generally agreed with the report's findings, and FAA and EPA offered technical clarifications.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-37](#). For more information, contact Gerald Dillingham at (202) 512-2834 or dillingham@gao.gov.

AVIATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Initial Voluntary Airport Low Emissions Program Projects Reduce Emissions, and FAA Plans to Assess the Program's Overall Performance as Participation Increases

What GAO Found

While the number of airports that have undertaken VALE projects is relatively small compared with the number of eligible airports, the number of participants in the program is increasing, as are the range and scope of projects being conducted and the amount of money spent on them. As of September 2008, 9 of the 160 airports that were eligible had or were planning to initiate a VALE project, which is up from 2 participating airports in VALE's initial year of operation in 2005. FAA expects participation in VALE to increase as more airports become familiar with the program. Although FAA may be correct in its assumption about participation, officials GAO interviewed from 4 nonparticipating airports, and others, such as representatives of airport associations, indicated various reasons for airports not wanting to participate in the program, which is funded through the same sources of funds—AIP grants or PFCs—as other airport development projects. One reason is that some airports have a misperception that VALE projects compete with other projects, such as runways or terminals, for AIP funding. According to FAA officials, this is usually not the case because VALE projects are funded through a discretionary AIP set-aside for noise and emission projects. FAA officials want to increase FAA's outreach to airports regarding VALE, but noted that the regional staff who are responsible for outreach have limited time for this purpose. VALE projects have ranged from airports' purchase of fuel-efficient vehicles to projects that help decrease aircraft ground emissions. Expenditures for the VALE program have been nearly \$20 million for 20 projects through fiscal year 2008 (with 56 percent of these expenditures occurring in fiscal year 2008). All participating airports have used AIP grants to fund VALE projects for various reasons, mainly because their PFCs have already been committed for high-priority, large-scale terminal improvement projects that may not be eligible for any type of AIP grants.

FAA has yet to assess the outcomes and overall performance of the VALE program. However, VALE projects are expected to reduce emissions at participating airports, and two airports have taken advantage of the program to obtain emission credits for planned construction projects. According to FAA data, the VALE projects initiated to date will reduce emissions of such pollutants as nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide by over 5,700 tons estimated over the projects' lifetime, which range from 10 to 40 years. According to FAA, the emission reductions resulting from VALE projects, although large in some cases, such as equipping gates with electricity and air conditioning outlets for aircraft, represent a small fraction of total emissions at participating airports. FAA plans to assess the overall performance of the VALE program as participation increases. FAA officials have begun developing cost-effectiveness measures, such as the amount of emission reductions per dollar spent. FAA officials stated that based on the number and size of VALE projects funded to date, they believe more history and experience with the program is needed before the agency develops other performance measures, such as setting goals for the number of VALE projects