



Highlights of [GAO-06-1091T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. commercial aviation industry has had an extraordinary safety record in recent years. However, expected increases in air traffic—including the introduction of new vehicles into the national airspace, such as unmanned vehicles and very light jets—and human resource issues, present challenges that have the potential to strain the existing safety oversight system. GAO's testimony focuses on these questions: (1) How is the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ensuring that the areas of highest safety risk are addressed? (2) How is FAA ensuring that its staff maintain the skills and knowledge to consistently carry out the agency's oversight programs? and (3) What are the key safety challenges facing FAA? This statement is based on our recent reports on FAA's inspection oversight programs, industry partnership programs, and enforcement and training programs. It is also based on interviews with FAA and relevant industry officials.

What GAO Recommends

To help FAA fully realize the benefits of its safety oversight system, GAO has made several recommendations to address the weaknesses identified in GAO's reviews. Although FAA has begun addressing the recommendations, many have not been fully implemented.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1091T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham, Ph.D., at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

AVIATION SAFETY

FAA's Safety Efforts Generally Strong but Face Challenges

What GAO Found

FAA's aviation safety oversight system includes programs that focus on identifying and mitigating risks through a system safety approach and by leveraging resources, but as FAA is still developing evaluations for some of these programs, it remains unclear the extent to which they are achieving their intended effects. FAA's system safety approach for overseeing airlines—through the Air Transportation Oversight System (ATOS) and Surveillance and Evaluation Program (SEP)—uses inspection staff efficiently by prioritizing workload based on areas of highest risk and ensuring that corrective actions have been taken. However, recent and planned changes that would move inspections of about 100 airlines from SEP to ATOS will shift inspector workload and might affect FAA's capability to oversee the industry. FAA also concentrates its limited staff resources on the most safety-critical functions and through its designee programs delegates other, less critical activities to designees. Designees perform about 90 percent of certification-related activities, and thus allow FAA to better leverage resources. GAO's recent work found some weaknesses in FAA's system safety approach and recommended that FAA develop effective evaluative processes and accurate nationwide data on its safety oversight programs to address these weaknesses so that program managers and other officials have assurance that the programs attain their intended effect. FAA has begun implementing those recommendations but does not plan to evaluate SEP, which it intends to discontinue after December 2007.

Training—including mandatory training requirements for FAA's workforce as well as designees—is an integral part of FAA's safety oversight system. GAO has reported that FAA has generally followed effective management practices for planning, developing, delivering, and assessing the impact of its technical training for safety inspectors, although some practices have yet to be fully implemented. However, several actions could improve the results of its training efforts. For example, FAA develops technical courses on an ad hoc basis rather than as part of an overall curriculum for each type of inspector, such as inspectors of operations or cabin safety, because the agency has not systematically identified the technical skills and competencies each type of inspector needs to effectively perform inspections. FAA has recognized the need to improve its training program in this and other areas.

FAA faces several key safety challenges, including not meeting its performance target for commercial air carrier safety this year because of recent fatal accidents. Further, FAA's ability to oversee aviation safety will be affected by recent and anticipated trends in inspector and air traffic controller attrition. Also, FAA intends to enhance runway safety by relying on new technologies that are expected to reduce runway accidents. However, schedule delays and cost increases challenge FAA's ability to deploy this technology. Finally, new types of aviation vehicles are changing the aviation industry and will require new areas of expertise for FAA's inspectors and controllers.