July 25, 2006

NEXT GENERATION AIR TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

Preliminary Analysis of Progress and Challenges Associated with the Transformation of the National Airspace System

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-915T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The health of our nation's air transportation system is critical to our citizens and economy. However, the current approach to managing air transportation is becoming increasingly inefficient and operationally obsolete. In 2003, Congress created the Joint Planning and Development Office (JPDO) to plan for and coordinate, with federal and nonfederal stakeholders, a transformation from the current air traffic control (ATC) system to the "next generation air transportation system" (NGATS).

Housed within the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), JPDO has seven partner agencies that make up JPDO's senior policy committee: the Departments of Transportation, Commerce, Defense, and Homeland Security; FAA; the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. This testimony, which provides preliminary results from GAO's ongoing work on JPDO, provides information on (1) the status of JPDO's efforts to plan for NGATS, (2) the key challenges facing JPDO as it moves forward with its planning efforts, and (3) the key challenges facing FAA as it implements the transformation while continuing its current operations. The statement is based on GAO's analysis of JPDO documents, interviews, and the views of a panel of experts, as well as on past GAO work.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-915T.

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.

What GAO Found

JPDO has developed a framework for planning and coordination with its federal partner agencies and nonfederal stakeholders that is consistent with the requirements of its authorizing legislation—Vision 100—and with several practices that our previous work has shown can facilitate federal interagency collaboration and the development of an enterprise architecture (i.e., system blueprint). JPDO's framework includes an integrated plan that provides a vision for NGATS, an organizational structure and processes for leveraging the resources and expertise of federal and nonfederal stakeholders, and an enterprise architecture that defines the specific requirements for NGATS.

As JPDO moves forward, it will face leadership, leveraging, and commitment challenges. Currently, JPDO lacks a permanent director and a permanent chairperson of its senior policy committee to provide the leadership needed to overcome barriers to interagency coordination. In addition, despite early successes, JPDO may have difficulty continuing to leverage its partner agencies' resources and expertise for NGATS because these agencies have missions and priorities in addition to NGATS and JPDO does not yet have signed, long-term agreements with the partner agencies on their respective roles and responsibilities. Finally, JPDO faces the challenge of convincing nonfederal stakeholders that the government is fully committed to implementing NGATS, given that, in some instances, it has discontinued work on new technologies for the national airspace system.

FAA faces challenges in institutionalizing recent improvements in its management and acquisition processes, as well as in obtaining the expertise and resources necessary to implement NGATS. First, institutionalizing FAA's process improvements is critical to successfully implementing NGATS. Second, FAA may lack the expertise needed to manage the NGATS effort. GAO has identified two potential approaches for FAA to supplement its capabilities that FAA is considering. Third, achieving cost savings is critical to funding the implementation of NGATS.

Air Traffic Management

Sources: GAO; PhotoDisc