

Highlights of [GAO-03-542](#), a report to congressional committees

# NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM

## Current Efforts and Proposed Changes to Improve Performance of FAA's Air Traffic Control System

### Why GAO Did This Study

To accelerate the modernization and improve the performance of the air traffic control system, the Wendell H. Ford Aviation Investment and Reform Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (AIR-21) created the Air Traffic Services Subcommittee (subcommittee) to oversee the air traffic control system and help the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) address long-standing weaknesses in its modernization program. The subcommittee is part of an aviation advisory council and consists of five private sector members with business expertise. AIR-21 gave the subcommittee the authority to approve strategic plans, budgets, and procurements over \$100 million. In addition, AIR-21 required FAA to hire a chief operating officer to manage the system's day-to-day operations.

AIR-21 mandated that GAO report on the success of the subcommittee in improving the performance of the air traffic control system. Accordingly, as agreed with the congressional committees' offices, GAO reviewed the (1) actions taken by the subcommittee to carry out its oversight responsibilities and the obstacles that it encountered in doing so and (2) changes to the subcommittee's organization and oversight responsibilities that have been proposed to improve the performance of the air traffic control system.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-542](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-542).

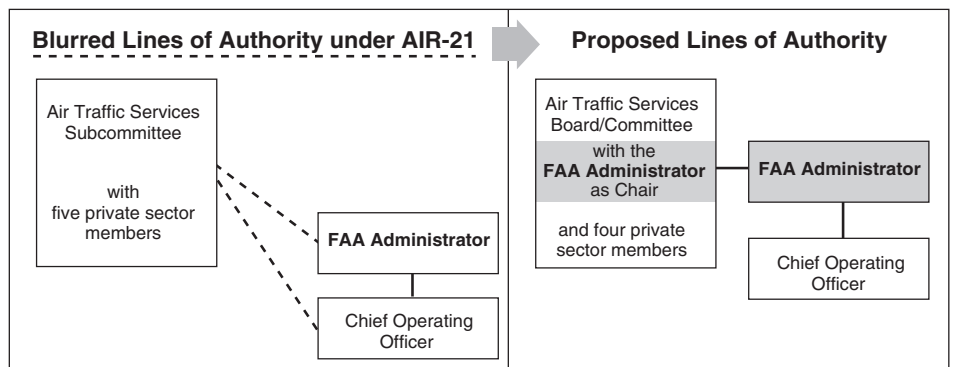
To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham at (202) 512-2834 or [dillinghamg@gao.gov](mailto:dillinghamg@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

To carry out its oversight responsibilities, the subcommittee has focused on bringing performance management, accountability, and a more businesslike structure to the air traffic control system. It is working with FAA managers to refine and implement performance measures that will track safety indicators, such as operational errors and runway incursions, as well as the cost to provide air traffic control services. The subcommittee also has taken some specific actions, as provided in AIR-21, including reviewing and approving a budget request and five large procurements that FAA had initiated for the air traffic control system. However, the subcommittee has encountered obstacles in carrying out its responsibilities, the greatest of which has been FAA's inability to hire a chief operating officer. Without a chief operating officer to initiate actions that the subcommittee is responsible for reviewing and approving, the subcommittee's influence has been limited. According to the subcommittee, a major difficulty in hiring a chief operating officer has been uncertainty about the position's responsibilities, reporting relationships, and performance measures.

The Congress, the administration, the subcommittee, and other stakeholders have proposed changes to the subcommittee's organization and oversight responsibilities that they believe would improve the performance of the air traffic control system. These changes could clarify uncertainties in the law or would modify the subcommittee's approval authority. For example, three legislative proposals would designate the FAA Administrator as the chair of the subcommittee. While this change could eliminate any uncertainty about the chief operating officer's reporting relationships and could make it easier to hire a chief operating officer, it also would reduce the number of private sector members and give the greatest authority to the FAA member (see figure). Two of these proposals also would alter the subcommittee's approval authority. For example, one would make the subcommittee an advisory rather than an oversight body. The merits of these proposals depend on the extent to which approval authority is considered necessary or desirable to bring about improvements in the air traffic control system.

### Current and Proposed Oversight and Management Structure



Source: GAO.