



Highlights of [GAO-09-435T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies; Committee on Appropriations; House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

A safe, efficient, and convenient transportation system is integral to the health of our economy and quality of life. Our nation's vast transportation system of airways, railways, roads, transit systems, and waterways has served this need, yet is under considerable pressure due to increasing congestion and costs to maintain and improve the system. Calls for increased investment come at a time when traditional funding for transportation projects is increasingly strained. The authorizing legislation supporting transportation programs will soon expire.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) implements national transportation policy and administers most federal transportation programs. DOT received funds for transportation infrastructure projects through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to aid in economic recovery. DOT also requested \$72.5 billion to carry out its activities for fiscal year 2010.

This statement presents GAO's views on major challenges facing DOT and Congress as they work to administer recovery funds and reauthorize surface transportation and aviation programs. It is based on work GAO has completed over the last several years. GAO has made recommendations to DOT to improve transportation programs; the agency has generally agreed with these recommendations. To supplement this existing work, GAO obtained information on the recovery funds provided to DOT.

View [GAO-09-435T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or siggerudk@gao.gov.

TRANSPORTATION PROGRAMS

Challenges Facing the Department of Transportation and Congress

What GAO Found

The Department of Transportation received about \$48 billion of recovery funds for investments in transportation infrastructure from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. As with other executive agencies, DOT is faced with the challenges of using these funds in ways that will aid economic recovery, making wise funding choices while spending the money quickly, and ensuring accountability for results. GAO will report to Congress bimonthly on how states and localities use the recovery funds received from DOT.

DOT and Congress will also be faced with numerous challenges as they work to reauthorize surface transportation and aviation programs.

- **Funding the nation's transportation system.** Revenues to support the Highway Trust Fund are not keeping pace with spending levels and the Highway Account was nearly depleted last summer. In addition, the excise taxes that fund Airport and Airway Trust Fund revenues have been lower than previously forecasted, and forecasts of future revenues have declined. Declining revenues in both trust funds may adversely affect DOT's ability to continue to fund surface transportation and aviation programs at levels previously assumed.
- **Improving transportation safety.** Although the number of traffic crashes and the associated fatality rate has decreased over the last 10 years, the number of fatalities has remained at about 42,000 annually. The continued high level of fatalities and difficulties experienced by states in implementing grant programs raise issues for Congress to consider in restructuring these programs during reauthorization. While the U.S. commercial aviation industry is among the safest in the world, accidents can have catastrophic consequences. The lack of performance measures and complete data limit DOT's ability to improve safety and manage safety risks.
- **Improving transportation mobility.** Despite large increases in transportation spending, congestion on our nation's highways has increased over the last 10 years and increased demand will further strain the system. Flight delays and cancellations at congested airports continue to plague the U.S. aviation system. For example, almost one in four flights either arrived late or was canceled in 2008, and the average flight delay increased despite a 6 percent annual decline in the total number of operations through December 2008. Congestion poses serious economic as well as environmental and health concerns for the nation.
- **Transforming the nation's air traffic control system.** The air traffic control modernization program is technically complex and costly. The Federal Aviation Administration will need to accelerate the implementation of new and existing technologies, consider incentives for aircraft operators to acquire those technologies, and sustain the current system while transitioning to the new one, among other things.