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FAA's New Air Traffic System Hits Turbulence



By JOAN LOWY Associated Press
WASHINGTON October 5, 2011 (AP)

The government's program to modernize the nation's air traffic control system has run into serious problems that threaten to increase its cost and delay its completion, a government watchdog said.

The Federal Aviation Administration's program to replace the current air traffic control system with a system based on satellite technology is being held back by software problems that have delayed full deployment of a critical flight tracking system, Transportation Department inspector general Calvin Scovel told a House hearing Wednesday.

The agency also hasn't set deadlines for when key aspects of the new air traffic control system will be in place, Scovel said. Nor has FAA made clear to airlines and other air traffic system users exactly what benefits they can expect and when they'll be achieved, he said.

As a result, airlines and others are being discouraged from spending money on cockpit equipment necessary to take advantage of the new air traffic system, Scovel said. Many of the new system's benefits hinge on airlines equipping their planes with expensive new equipment to communicate with air traffic controllers and broadcast their location to other planes and controllers.

Scovel's comments were echoed by a second government watchdog from the Government Accountability Office.

FAA Deputy Administrator Michael Huerta, also testifying before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said the agency is making progress on the flight tracking system, which has been operating for nearly a year at air traffic control centers in Salt Lake City and Seattle.

The modernization program is also likely to benefit from recent management reorganization, he said.

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FAA officials have predicted the agency's NextGen modernization program will be as revolutionary for civil aviation as was the advent of radar six decades ago. It's actually a collection of new programs aimed at moving planes faster and more efficiently that will markedly change almost every major aspect of today's air traffic system. Those changes are considered critical to enabling the system to absorb substantial predicted increases in air traffic without becoming paralyzed by congestion.

The troubled \$2.1 billion software program is the main tool air traffic controllers will use to identify and track aircraft, except when planes are immediately approaching and departing airports. It was supposed to have been completed by the end of last year, but the FAA now doesn't expect to be finished until 2014, at a cost overrun of \$330 million, Scovel said.

Those estimates may be optimistic. A Mitre Corp. study and an analysis by the inspector general's office estimate the added cost of the computer system, called ERAM, could be as much as \$500 million, with potential delays stretching to 2016, Scovel said.

David Grizzle, the head of the FAA's Air Traffic Organization, described ERAM to an air traffic control conference earlier this week as "the chassis on which all the NextGen functionality will be bolted." He said the system is expected to increase the number of planes controllers can handle by nearly two-thirds.

"We've got to get it right, and we've encountered some significant challenges in delivery," Grizzle said.

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