


GAO
 Accountability Integrity Reliability
Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-40](#), a report to Ranking Democratic Member, Subcommittee on Aviation, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Why GAO Did This Study

The safety of the flying public and the reliability of the nation's aircraft depend, in part, on the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) regulation and certification of the aviation industry. FAA delegates the vast majority of its safety certification activities to about 13,600 private persons and organizations, known as "designees," which are currently grouped into 18 different programs. Among other tasks, designees perform physical examinations to ensure that pilots are medically fit to fly and examine the airworthiness of aircraft.

GAO reviewed (1) the strengths of FAA's designee programs, (2) the weaknesses of those programs and factors contributing to those weaknesses, and (3) potential improvements to the programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAA: (1) establish a program to evaluate all designee programs, giving priority to those programs that have not been evaluated, (2) develop mechanisms to improve compliance with existing designee oversight policies, and (3) upgrade its databases to provide complete and consistent information on all designee programs and the extent to which oversight is occurring.

FAA officials generally agreed with our recommendations, but expressed concerns about our use of an expert panel to identify weaknesses in the programs.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-40.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Z. Hecker, (202) 512-2834, heckerj@gao.gov.

AVIATION SAFETY

FAA Needs to Strengthen the Management of Its Designee Programs

What GAO Found

The key strength of FAA's designee programs is their ability to leverage agency resources. Allowing technically qualified individuals and organizations to perform 90 percent of certification activities enables FAA to better concentrate its limited staff resources on the most safety-critical functions, such as certifying new and complex aircraft designs. For the aviation industry, designee programs enable individuals and companies to obtain required FAA certifications—such as approvals of aircraft designs—in a timely manner, thus reducing delays and costs to industry that might result from scheduling direct reviews by FAA. For example, officials from Boeing told us that using designees has added significantly to the company's ability to improve daily operations by decreasing certification time.

Inconsistent FAA oversight and application of program policies are key weaknesses of the designee programs. FAA headquarters has evaluated only 6 of the 18 designee programs over the last 7 years. FAA conducted the evaluations on an ad hoc basis and lacks requirements or criteria for periodically evaluating these programs. FAA uses these evaluations to determine whether designee programs are complying with agency policies. In addition, FAA field offices do not always oversee designee activities according to agency policy. For example, a recent FAA study found that inspectors were not reviewing designated pilot examiners' work on an annual basis as policy requires. Potential reasons for inconsistent oversight include (1) incomplete databases that FAA uses to manage its oversight of designees, (2) workload demands for FAA staff that limit the time spent on designee oversight, and (3) the lack of adequate training for FAA staff who oversee designees. While we did not find a direct link between inconsistent oversight of these programs and specific safety problems, the lack of consistent oversight limits FAA's assurance that designees perform their work according to federal standards.

Opportunities exist for FAA to improve (1) program oversight to ensure consistent compliance with existing policies by FAA staff and (2) the completeness of databases used in designee oversight. For example, FAA could evaluate more of its field offices and designees—efforts modeled partly on the assessments conducted by some FAA regional offices—to ascertain the extent to which policies are being followed.

Aircraft Undergoing Certification at Organizational Designee Facility



Source: Gulfstream Aerospace.