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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-10-120](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) predicts that the national airspace system will become increasingly congested over time, imposing costs of delay on passengers and regions. While transforming the current air-traffic control system to the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) may provide additional en route capacity, many airports will still face constraints at their runways and terminals. In light of these forecasts, GAO was asked to evaluate regional airport planning in metropolitan regions with congested airports.

GAO (1) identified which airports are currently or will be significantly congested and the potential benefits of regional airport planning, (2) assessed how regions with congested airports use regional airport planning in decision making, and (3) identified factors that hinder or aid in the development and implementation of regional airport plans. GAO reviewed studies; interviewed FAA, airport, and other aviation and transportation officials; and conducted case studies in selected regions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of Transportation direct FAA to create a review process for RASPs and use its existing authority to give priority to funding airport projects that are consistent with RASPs. The Department of Transportation generally agreed to consider the revised recommendations.

View [GAO-10-120](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Gerald Dillingham, Ph.D., at (202) 512-2834 or dillingham@gao.gov.

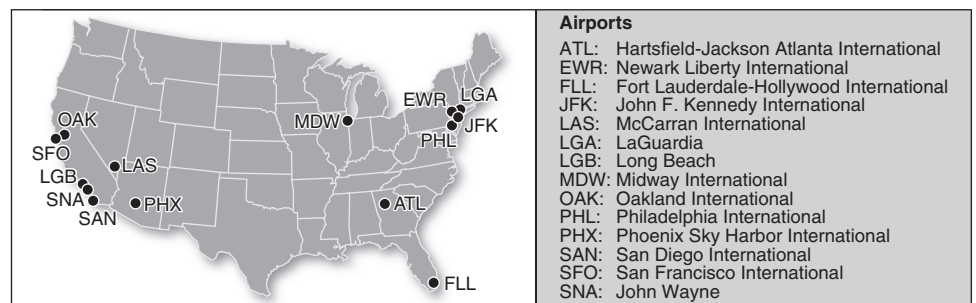
NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM

Regional Airport Planning Could Help Address Congestion If Plans Were Integrated with FAA and Airport Decision Making

What GAO Found

A number of airports are or will be significantly capacity constrained and thus congested within the next 16 years. However, many of them face environmental and other obstacles to developing additional airport capacity. In 2007, FAA identified 14 airports (in 10 metropolitan regions) that will be significantly capacity constrained by 2025, even assuming all currently planned improvements occur (see figure). Planned improvements include airport construction projects and implementation of NextGen technologies. Without these improvements, FAA predicts that 27 airports will be congested. According to the FAA assessment and other studies, regional airport planning may identify additional solutions, such as the increased use of alternate airports or other modes of travel, to help relieve airport congestion.

Airports Forecast to Need Capacity in 2025 after Planned Improvements



Sources: GAO analysis of FAA data; Map Resources (base map).

From 1999 through 2008, 9 of the 10 metropolitan regions with airports forecast to be significantly capacity constrained by 2025 have received a total of \$20 million in FAA funding for regional airport planning. Of those regions, 6 have developed or will develop regional airport system plans (RASP), which we found largely followed FAA's guidance for airport system planning. The remaining 4 regions have engaged in less comprehensive planning. FAA does not formally review RASPs, and they have been used selectively by FAA and airports in decision making for the planning and funding of individual airport projects. A few airport sponsors have pursued select strategies outlined in plans, while one airport sponsor rejected the RASP for its decision making.

Because regional airport planning is advisory, competing interests can derail development and implementation. Metropolitan planning organizations generally develop RASPs but have no authority over airport development. That authority rests with airports, which are not required to incorporate planning recommendations into their capital plans, and with FAA, which makes funding decisions on the basis of national priorities. In addition, airport, community, and airline interests may conflict in a region. For example, Philadelphia International does not support planning efforts that may divert traffic from its airport to alternate regional airports. By contrast, aligned interests and FAA involvement may aid regional planning and implementation, as has occurred in the Boston region.