FAA needs data policy changes to better address accidents, finds GAO

A nonfatal general aviation accident. Image: NTSB

The number of general aviation accidents has decreased from 1999 through 2011, but fatal accidents have never totaled fewer than 200 annually, meaning the Federal Aviation Administration needs to undertake steps to reduce accident rates and improve related data collection, says a report from the Government Accountability Office. In a report (.pdf) dated Oct. 4, auditors note that most general aviation accidents are a result of pilot error. Aircraft within the U.S. general aviation fleet are on average 40 years and old and typically consist of a single-engine piston plane, such as the Cessna 172.

The FAA bases some its accident-reduction goals and efforts on defined accident rates and annual flight hours--such as a goal to reduce the fatal accident rate per 100,000 flight hours by 10 percent from 2009 to 2018--but the GAO warns that "shortcomings in flight activity data" will make it difficult to achieve reductions in fatality rates among the riskier segments.

Currently, says the GAO, the FAA needs more specific performance measurements for each program in its accident reduction strategy to better determine if goals are being met or if more actions are needed, which is important because current operations "may not meet the overall goal by 2018."

This goal and others fall under several FAA initiatives including the renewal of the General Aviation Joint Steering Committee and the implementation of the Flight Standards Service's 5-year strategy. The GAJSC, a government and industry partnership, focuses mainly on analyzing accident information to develop intervention strategies. The GAO noted that the GAJSC is built on an approach already "deemed successful" in helping to reduce fatal commercial accidents.

The 5-year plan involves a series of efforts around risk management, outreach, training, and safety promotion, but, says the GAO, "has shortcomings that jeopardize its potential for success." The key piece the GAO feels should be addressed is the lack of "specific performance goals or measures for the activities under the 5-year strategy."

The GAO's recommendations comprise of a series of changes to the FAA's data policies, not the accident-reduction practices themselves. It recommends expanding available data to include each certificated pilot's recurrent training, with a mandate to update that information at regular intervals, along with other information for "root cause analyses" of accidents.

To strengthen measurements and better evaluate program goals, the GAO also suggests the FAA explore new ways to collect flight hours more often with methods that "minimize the impact on the general aviation community." This would allow the FAA to establish accident-reduction goals for each individual industry segment, making better use of its existing data and making the goals easier to manage and achieve.

For more:

-download the full report, GAO-13-36 (.pdf)

http://www.fiercegovernment.com/story/faa-needs-data-policy-changes-better-address-accidents-finds-gao/2012-10-17