GAO: FAA Dips Its Toes into SMS Waters

The FAA is making progress implementing safety management systems (SMS) both within the agency and for the aviation industry as a whole, but the effort is likely to take many years to complete, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

In a recent report to House and Senate aviation committees, the GAO concludes that the magnitude of SMS's potential impact on aviation oversight and the complexity of implementation are both a benefit and a drawback for the FAA. While SMS implementation could help ensure the continued safety of the U.S. aviation system, it could also drag down other large initiatives as the agency works with limited resources.

"With agency resources and capacity in great demand," the GAO said, "it will be important for the agency to maximize the efficiency of SMS implementation, both through efficient use of its workforce and creation of policies and systems that standardize and streamline implementation."

But the government watchdog organization warned that data protection concerns from airport officials and others could prevent aviation stakeholders from fully embracing SMS implementation, thus hindering its effectiveness.

"Without assurance of protection from state freedom of information act laws," the GAO wrote, "some aviation stakeholders may choose to collect only the bare minimum of safety-related data or may choose to limit the extent to which collected information is shared among aviation stakeholders."

For decades, the aviation industry and federal regulators, including the FAA, have used data reactively to identify the causes of aviation accidents and incidents to take actions to prevent their recurrence. While the FAA plans to continue to use data to analyze past safety events, it is also working to use data proactively to search for risks.

The FAA is undertaking the transition to SMS in coordination with

the international aviation community, working with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to adopt applicable global standards for safety management. ICAO requires SMS for the management of safety risk in air operations, maintenance organizations, air traffic services and airports, as well as certain flight-training operations and for organizations that design or manufacture aircraft.

Further, ICAO has established for its 191-member countries safety management requirements that mandate that civil aviation authorities-such as the FAA-establish SMS, which it refers to as "state safety programs."

ICAO first mandated SMS worldwide for air traffic service providers, such as air carriers and certified airports, in 2001. The United Nations-affiliated organization later specified that member states should mandate SMS implementation for airports, air carriers and others by 2009.

While the FAA began to implement SMS in 2005, FAA officials informed ICAO that the agency and industry would not be able to meet the 2009 deadline. The international aviation body is allowing the FAA to take additional time because the U.S. is a leading implementer of SMS worldwide, and because the U.S. aviation system may be more complicated than other countries' because of its size and complexity. ICAO has not specified a new date by which the FAA is expected to comply.

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