

FAA to redefine aviation in near future, says chief

The Federal Aviation Administration will make a variety of critical decisions regarding aviation-related issues over the next two to three years - decisions that will "define what aviation looks like in this country for the next 25, 30 or 40 years," the FAA's top official said Thursday.

"There is so much as an industry that we need to do," Michael Huerta, the FAA's acting administrator, said Thursday at a Wichita Aero Club luncheon where he was the keynote speaker.

The luncheon was held at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Wichita Airport.

Earlier, Huerta spoke at Bombardier Aerospace's annual Safety Standdown, an event attended by hundreds of pilots and other aviation industry professionals focusing on safety education.

Wichita has long been a cradle of aviation innovation, Huerta said at the luncheon. The city's manufacturers have delivered hundreds of thousands of airplanes over the years.

General aviation has been good for the U.S., contributing positively to the country's balance of trade.

The tremendous advances made in aviation in the first century of flight are "mind-boggling," he said.

The agency is tackling issues facing the industry, such as enhancing safety while decreasing the costs associated with aircraft certification, Huerta said.

It formed an aviation rule-making committee to look at ways to make improvements.

Today, "essentially what we're doing is preventing the last accident," Huerta said, an approach that has served the industry well.

Going forward, the FAA wants to learn the safety lessons from the past, but also take more proactive, results-oriented steps. It wants to enhance general aviation safety while cutting certification costs in half, Huerta said. One way to work toward that goal, he said, would be to have a standard set of testing for a product to be certified by the various foreign aviation authorities around the world.

Today, one foreign authority typically requires manufacturers to perform a test on, say, a wing that is different than what the next foreign authority requires.

Having more global testing standards would take costs out of the process and help companies develop technologies faster, Huerta said.

"We still have authority to whether an aircraft design meets the standard," he said.

The FAA rule-making committee will finish its report next year. Another issue is how to standardize the use of non-standard equipment for existing general aviation aircraft. The goal is to make it easier for owners to install life-saving products on their airplanes, Huerta said.

New general aviation airplanes have the latest safety features, but are much more expensive to buy. And the bulk of the general aviation fleet is about 40 years old, he said.

Another issue is how best to replace low-lead aviation fuel used by 160,000 airplanes with a non-leaded fuel.

An FAA report was issued earlier this year, and Huerta said its recommendations are still being considered.

The FAA is also working on a multi-billion NextGen air traffic control modernization program, one that would shift the use of ground-based radar to satellite technology.

Huerta was confirmed as the FAA's deputy administrator by the Senate in June 2010 and assumed the role of acting administrator in December 2011.

Huerta worked with presidential candidate Mitt Romney on the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. He served as managing director of the games.

Before joining the FAA, he held senior positions at Affiliated Computer Services, including president of its Transportation Solutions Group.

He also was commissioner of the New York City's Department of Ports, International Trade and Commerce and served as executive director of the Port of San Francisco. He also held senior positions in the U.S. Transportation Department in Washington, D.C.

He holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of California-Riverside and a master's in international relations from Princeton University.

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