



Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives

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Washington, DC 20515

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June 10, 2016

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Subcommittee on Aviation
FROM: Staff, Subcommittee on Aviation
RE: Hearing on A Review of the Federal Aviation Administration's Air Traffic Controller Hiring, Staffing and Training Plans

PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Aviation will hold a hearing on Wednesday, June 15, 2016, at 10:00 a.m. in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building to review the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) air traffic controller hiring, staffing and training plans. The Subcommittee will hear from representatives of the Air Traffic Organization (ATO) of the FAA, the U.S. Department of Transportation Office of the Inspector General (DOT IG), the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), and Southwest Airlines.

BACKGROUND

The United States' air traffic control (ATC) system manages the most complex and busy airspace in the world. The United States' ATC system is also among the safest in the world. The FAA currently employs over 14,000 controllers in 316 air traffic control (ATC) facilities.¹ These 316 facilities are comprised of airport traffic control towers (which manage traffic within 10 miles of the airport), terminal radar approach control (TRACON) facilities (which manage traffic within a 40 mile radius of a primary airport), and air route traffic control centers (which manage traffic outside of terminal airspace and provide approach control services to small airports where no terminal service is provided).² An additional 1,292 civilian contract controllers and more than

¹ U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, "A Plan for the Future: 10-Year Strategy for the Air Traffic Control Workforce, 2016-2025," p. 10.

https://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/controller_staffing/media/CWP_2016.pdf

² *Id.*

10,000 military controllers also provide air traffic services for the National Airspace System (NAS).³ The average age of an air traffic controller is 38 with 13 years of service.⁴

FAA Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan

Section 221 of *VISION 100 – Century of Aviation Reauthorization Act* (P.L. 108-176) required the FAA to release an annual report to Congress that describes the agency’s overall air traffic controller workforce plan. The 2016 report provides staffing ranges for all of the FAA’s ATC facilities and the number of onboard controllers as of September 19, 2015.⁵ In setting controller staffing levels, the FAA “staffs to traffic,” which means the FAA controller staffing levels are based on traffic volume and controller workload.⁶ (See chart on page 6 below showing air traffic and controller staffing trends.) In “staff[ing] to traffic,” the FAA must consider a variety of factors that are specific to each air traffic control facility.⁷

According to the FAA, proper staffing levels also depend on the efficient scheduling of employees, so the agency tracks a number of indicators as part of its ongoing review of controller staffing levels, including overtime, controllers’ time on position (which is the total time spent managing traffic), leave usage, and the number of trainees.⁸

Status of Controller Staffing and Hiring

Air traffic demand has declined significantly since 2000, which was the peak year for air traffic.⁹ According to the 2016 Controller Workforce Plan, since 2000, traffic volume has declined by 23 percent, with no expectation that traffic volume will return to peak levels in the near future. Despite this decline in traffic, the number of air traffic controllers has stayed constant¹⁰ (See chart on page 6). The number of controllers eligible to retire, which peaked in 2007 due to the retirements of those controllers hired after the 1981 controller strike, is expected to continue to decline over the next decade.¹¹ In the last five years, 3,213 air traffic controllers have retired and 4,700 new controllers have been hired.¹²

The FAA has missed its annual hiring targets in each of the last six years, which compounded staffing difficulties. In 2015, FAA missed the hiring target by 187 controllers. Despite these lower than expected hires, the FAA maintains that it is on track to reach its fiscal year 2016 hiring targets.¹³

³ *Id.*

⁴ FAA Presentation to House Aviation Subcommittee staff, “*Air Traffic Control Specialists: Staffing Levels, Hiring and Training*,” May 25, 2016, p. 10.

⁵ *Supra* note 1 at p. 2.

⁶ *Id.* at p. 4.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at p. 12.

⁹ *Id.* at p. 6.

¹⁰ *Id.* at p. 7.

¹¹ *Id.* at p. 9.

¹² *Id.* at p. 5.

¹³ *Supra* note 4 at p. 3.

It can take many years of training for an air traffic controller to become fully certified, therefore the FAA’s hiring plan takes into account both the length of time it takes to complete training and training failures.¹⁴ According to the FAA, in fiscal year 2015, Academy failures were significantly above the forecasted level (142 percent of forecast).¹⁵ The FAA is still assessing the cause of this uptick in training failures.

Department of Transportation Inspector General Reports on Controller Hiring, Training, and Staffing

In January 2016, the U.S. Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General (DOT IG) issued a report on the challenges FAA continues to face in ensuring enough fully trained controllers at critical ATC facilities.¹⁶ The DOT IG found that when excluding controllers-in-training, 13 of the 23 critical facilities reviewed had CPC levels below the facility’s planned staffing range.¹⁷ The DOT IG found “significant weaknesses” in the process that the FAA uses to determine the staffing ranges in its en route facilities—air route traffic control centers.¹⁸ The DOT IG recommended that the FAA develop and implement a methodology with completion dates for determining en route facility staffing ranges, as suggested by the National Academy of Sciences.¹⁹

The DOT IG also found that FAA lacks accurate and complete data on optimal controller scheduling practices and fatigue.²⁰ Accordingly, the IG recommended that the FAA use the results of a commercially available, automated scheduling program used by other countries, including Australia, Canada, and Germany, called the Operational Planning and Scheduling (OPAS) tool.²¹

Lastly, the DOT IG concluded that the FAA has not yet established an effective process for balancing training requirements with pending retirements when managing its controller resources at critical ATC facilities.²²

Since 2012, the DOT IG has raised concerns about staffing levels at critical ATC facilities such as TRACONs in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and New York.²³ Specifically, the IG found that 15 of the 21 critical facilities it reviewed had a higher percentage of controllers in

¹⁴ *Supra* note 1 at p. 7.

¹⁵ FAA Presentation to House Aviation Subcommittee staff, “2016 Controller Workforce Plan Update,” May 3, 2016, p. 19.

¹⁶ Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Transportation, “FAA Continues to Face Challenges in Ensuring Enough Fully Trained Controllers at Critical Facilities,” AV-2016-014, January 11, 2016.

¹⁷ *Id.* at p. 2.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at p. 13. Section 608 of the *FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012* (P.L. 112-95) required the Transportation Research Board (TRB) of the National Academy of Sciences to study “the air traffic controller standards used by the [FAA] to estimate staffing needs for FAA air traffic controllers to ensure the safe operation of the national airspace system in the most cost effective manner.” The National Academy of Sciences study concluded that the design and execution of FAA’s air route facility staffing model included unrealistic assumptions about controller workload. Transportation Research Board, National Academy of Sciences, Special Report 314, “*The Federal Aviation Administration’s Approach for Determining Future Air Traffic Controller Staffing Needs*,” 2014, p. 2.

²⁰ *Supra* note 16 at pp. 6-8.

²¹ *Id.* at p. 8.

²² *Id.* at p. 9.

²³ Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Transportation, “*Enhanced Oversight of Staffing and Training at FAA’s Critical Facilities is Needed to Maintain Continuity of Operations*,” AV-2012-039, January 12, 2012.

training than the national average.²⁴ Furthermore, the DOT IG found that between 2008 and 2010, critical ATC facilities lost roughly 40 percent of their trainees to attrition, compared to the national average of 24 percent.²⁵ The DOT IG also found that critical facilities had higher levels of controllers eligible to retire than the national average.²⁶ The DOT IG found that the FAA had not provided the staffing and training resources needed to retain new hires.²⁷

Overview of the Revised Controller Hiring Process

Over the last few years, FAA has made significant changes to its air traffic controller hiring process.²⁸ The two most significant changes were the elimination of the hiring preference for graduates of FAA’s ATC Collegiate Training Initiative (CTI) schools²⁹ and the introduction of a new Biographical Assessment (BA), a stand-alone, scored, multiple-choice exam that measures general and ATC-specific work experience, education and training, work habits, academic and other achievements.³⁰ The BA replaced an “experience questionnaire” that was part of the Air Traffic Selection and Training Test (AT-SAT), which is a pre-employment aptitude test that measures a candidate’s ability to perform the role of air traffic controller.

Under the revised hiring process, candidates from CTI schools are grouped within a “Track I” applicant pool that consists of candidates from the general public.³¹ Track I candidates must pass the BA as a prerequisite for taking the AT-SAT.³² Applicants with at least 52 weeks of experience as a controller (*i.e.*, former FAA or military controllers) are grouped separately within a “Track II” applicant pool.³³ Unlike Track I candidates, Track II candidates are not required to take the BA, AT-SAT, or attend the FAA Academy.³⁴

The FAA maintains that the changes to the hiring process resulted in greater efficiencies and improved the process by ending the use of large inventories separated by applicant source, as well as opening a vacancy announcement available on the same terms to all U.S. citizens to ensure “equitable treatment.”³⁵ Under its February 2015 Track I vacancy announcement, 18,302 candidates applied and 2,801 were selected.³⁶ Of the 2,300 candidates who applied under the FAA’s March 2015 Track II vacancy announcement, 989 were selected.³⁷

²⁴ *Id.* at p. 2.

²⁵ *Id.* at pp. 3-4.

²⁶ *Id.* at p. 4.

²⁷ *Id.* at p. 7.

²⁸ FAA White Paper Prepared for House Aviation Subcommittee staff, “*Changes to the Air Traffic Control Hiring Process*,” June 2016, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ <https://www.faa.gov/jobs/students/schools>

³⁰ http://faa.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/428/related/1

³¹ *Supra* note 28 at pp. 2-3.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Supra* note 4 at p. 2.

³⁷ *Id.*

WITNESS LIST

Ms. Teri L. Bristol
Chief Operating Officer
Air Traffic Organization
Federal Aviation Administration
(accompanied by Mr. Rickie Cannon,
Deputy Assistant Administrator for Human Resource Management, FAA)

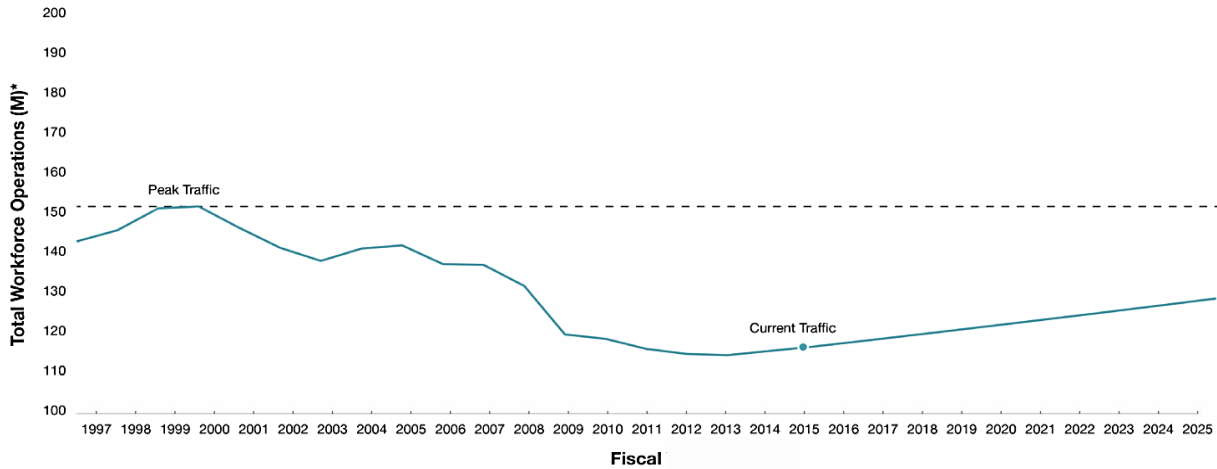
Mr. Matthew Hampton
Assistant Inspector General for Aviation Audits
Office of Inspector General
Department of Transportation

Mr. Paul Rinaldi
President
National Air Traffic Controllers Association

Mr. Randolph "Randy" Babbitt
Senior Vice President of Labor Relations
Southwest Airlines

FAA Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan, 2017-2025

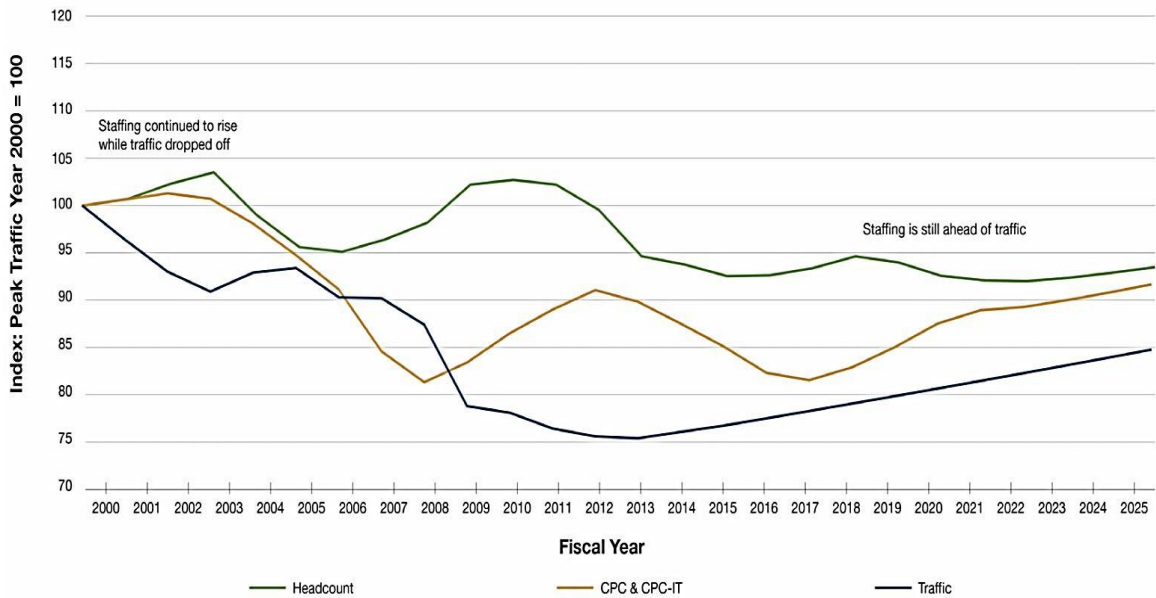
Air Traffic Forecast



*Total Workforce Operations = Tower + TRACON + Aircraft Handled by En Route Centers

Source: FAA

System-Wide Traffic and Controller Trends



Source: FAA