Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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December 3, 2015

BACKGROUND MEMO

TO:	Members, Subcommittee on Aviation
FROM:	Staff, Subcommittee on Aviation
RE:	Roundtable Policy Discussion on "Review of FAA Air Traffic Controller Staffing."

PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Aviation will meet on Tuesday, December 8, 2015, at 10:00 a.m. in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building to participate in a roundtable policy discussion to discuss the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) air traffic controller hiring, staffing and training plans. Participants will include Teri L. Bristol, Chief Operating Officer, Air Traffic Organization (ATO), FAA; Matthew Hampton, Assistant Inspector General for Aviation Audits, Office of Inspector General, Department of Transportation (IG); and Paul Rinaldi, President, National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA).

BACKGROUND

The United States' air traffic control system is as safe a system as any in the world. This high level of safety depends on the hard work and dedication of the FAA's air traffic controller workforce. The FAA currently employs over 14,000 controllers in 316 air traffic control (ATC) facilities. 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).[1]

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[1] U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, *"A Plan for the Future: 10-Year Strategy for the Air Traffic Control Workforce, 2015-2024,"* p. 10.
https://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/controller_staffing/media/CWP_2015.pdf

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 2015 report provides staffing ranges for all of the FAA's ATC facilities and actual onboard controllers as of September 20, 2014.[2] A key part of managing the national airspace system (NAS) involves aligning controller resources with demand.[3] In setting controller staffing levels, the FAA "staffs to traffic," which means that the FAA controller staffing levels are based on traffic volume and controller workload. [4] (See attached chart 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.[5]

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.[6] According to the 2015 Controller Staffing Plan, in FY 2014, the system average for overtime was 2.1 percent (a .4 percent increase from the FY 2013 level) while the average time on position was 4 hours and 10 minutes (compared to 4 hours and 8 minutes in FY 2013).[7]

Air traffic demand has declined significantly since 2000, which was the peak year for air traffic.[8] According to the 2015 Controller Workforce Plan, since 2000, traffic volume has declined by 24 percent, with no expectation traffic volume will return to peak levels in the near future. Despite this decline, the number of air traffic controllers has kept pace above the level of traffic.[9] Annual retirements, which peaked in 2007 due to the retirements of those controllers hired after the 1981 controller strike, are expected to continue to decline over the next decade. In the last five years, the FAA has hired approximately 4,400 new air traffic controllers and plans to hire an additional 6,300 new controllers over the next five years to keep pace with expected attrition and projected traffic growth.[10] Due to the hiring freeze from March 2013 through December 2013 put in place by the FAA in response to sequestration-related budget cuts, the FAA hired 1,112 controllers compared to the 1,286 new hires target included in the Controller Workforce Plan.[11]

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[2] *Id*.
[3] *Id*. at p. 4.
[4] *Id*.
[5] *Id*. at p. 12.
[6] *Id*.
[7] *Id*. at p. 4.
[8] *Id*.
[9] *Id*. at p. 7.
[10] *Id*. at p. 5.
[11] *Id*.

The total numbers of controllers in individual ATC facilities may exceed certain facilities' target staffing ranges.[12] But in counting controllers, the FAA includes developmental controllers - controllers who are not yet fully certified to perform full duties - in its numbers. The FAA includes developmental controllers to offset anticipated attrition of controllers currently at individual facilities.[13] Therefore, individual facilities' total headcount can be above the staffing range.[14]

Department of Transportation Inspector General 2012 Report

In January 2012, the Department of Transportation Inspector General (IG) released a report on air traffic controller staffing at critical FAA ATC facilities.[15] The IG reported that a majority of critical facilities had a relatively high number of developmentals in comparison to the national average.[16] Specifically, the IG found that 15 of the 21 critical facilities it reviewed had a higher percentage of controllers in training than the national average of 25 percent.[17] Furthermore, the 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.[18] The report also found that critical facilities had higher levels of controllers eligible to retire than the national average.[19] At the 21 critical facilities reviewed by the IG, 32 percent of certified professional controllers, on average, were retirement eligible, compared to the national facility average of 25 percent.[20]

The IG found that the FAA had not provided the staffing and training resources needed to retain new hires[21] and warned that the deployment of the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) over the next several years would further strain training resources as both new hires and veteran controllers must learn new air traffic procedures.[22] As a result of his review, the IG issued a number of recommendations "to better ensure continuity of operations at FAA's most critical facilities."[23]

Transportation Research Board Study

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

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[12] *Id*. at p. 4.

[13] *Id.*

[14] *Id.*

[15] 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.https://www.oig.dot.gov/sites/default/files/WEB%20FILE_Critical%20Facilities_issued%201-12-12.pdf

[16] *Id*. at 2.

[17] *Id.*

[18] *Id*.

[19] *Id*. at 3.

[20] *Id*.

[21] *Id*.

[22] *Id*.

[23] *Id.* at pp. 9-10.

manner." The TRB study, completed last year, concluded that FAA's staffing standards for airport control towers and terminal facilities were "reasonable" in developing initial estimates for the number of controllers per facility, but raised concerns with the validity of the model used for en route facilities (developed by MITRE).[24] Furthermore, TRB believed "the steps taken by FAA to create a controller staffing plan from the staffing standards and then execute such plan were obscure. As a result, the committee was unable to determine the extent to which FAA staffing imbalances are being corrected over time to help ensure cost-effective staffing."[25] The TRB study found that the FAA did not have the necessary data to anticipate the safety effects that changes in current controller staffing levels have on the nation's ATC system.[26] Finally, the TRB recommended that the FAA "should, as a matter of priority, continue its efforts to develop an improved scheduling tool capable of creating efficient controller work schedules that incorporate fatigue mitigation strategies."[27] The TRB indicated that "schedules can affect whether controller staff are used in a cost-effective manner", and reduce fatigue risks.[28]

KEY ISSUES

The key issues that will be addressed during this roundtable policy discussion include an update on controller hiring and staffing since the release of the 2015 Controller Workforce Plan, controller staffing levels at critical ATC facilities, the impact of previous and future planned changes to FAA's controller hiring process, the adequacy of controller training programs, and future staffing plans.

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[24] 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. http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/sr/sr314.pdf
[25] *Id.* at p. 2.
[26] *Id.* at p. 3.
[27] *Id.* at p.8.
[28] *Id.* at p.6.

ATTENDEE BIOGRAPHIES

Teri Bristol, Chief Operating Officer
Air Traffic Organization (ATO), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)
- Ms. Bristol has been Chief Operating Officer of the ATO since March 2014.
- Ms. Bristol has over 20 years of experience leading, directing, and managing Air Traffic and Technical Operations.
- Ms. Bristol previously served with the FAA as Vice President of Technical Operations, Vice President of the Service Center (now part of Mission Support Services), as well as Director of Terminal Program Operations.

Rickie Cannon, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Human Resources Management
Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)
- Mr. Cannon became Deputy Assistant Administrator for Human Resource Management in December 2013.
- Mr. Cannon is responsible for strategic partnership with FAA leadership and human resource (HR) support of over 46,000 workforce personnel.
- Mr. Cannon previously served as Director of Regional Human Resource Services from 2012-2013, and Director of Human Resource Operations from 2009-2012.
- Prior to his FAA career, Mr. Cannon held numerous HR leadership positions in his 25 year tenure with the U.S. Army.

Matthew Hampton, Assistant Inspector General for Aviation Audits
Office of Inspector General, Department of Transportation (DOT)
- Mr. Hampton has been with the DOT IG since 1998.
- Mr. Hampton holds over 25 years of experience in auditing and evaluating aviation programs.
- Mr. Hampton's federal service includes experience with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

Paul Rinaldi, President
National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA)
- Mr. Rinaldi has served as president of NATCA since 2009, and was re-elected in 2012 and 2015.
- Mr. Rinaldi served as NATCA's Executive Vice President for three years prior to being elected president.
- Mr. Rinaldi previously had a 16-year career as an air traffic controller at Washington-Dulles Tower (IAD), in which capacity he also served as the IAD Facility Representative.
- Mr. Rinaldi holds positions on the NextGen Advisory Committee (NAC), the FAA Management Advisory Council (MAC), the RTCA Policy Board, the board of the Eno Center for Transportation, and the FAA National Labor-Management Forum.

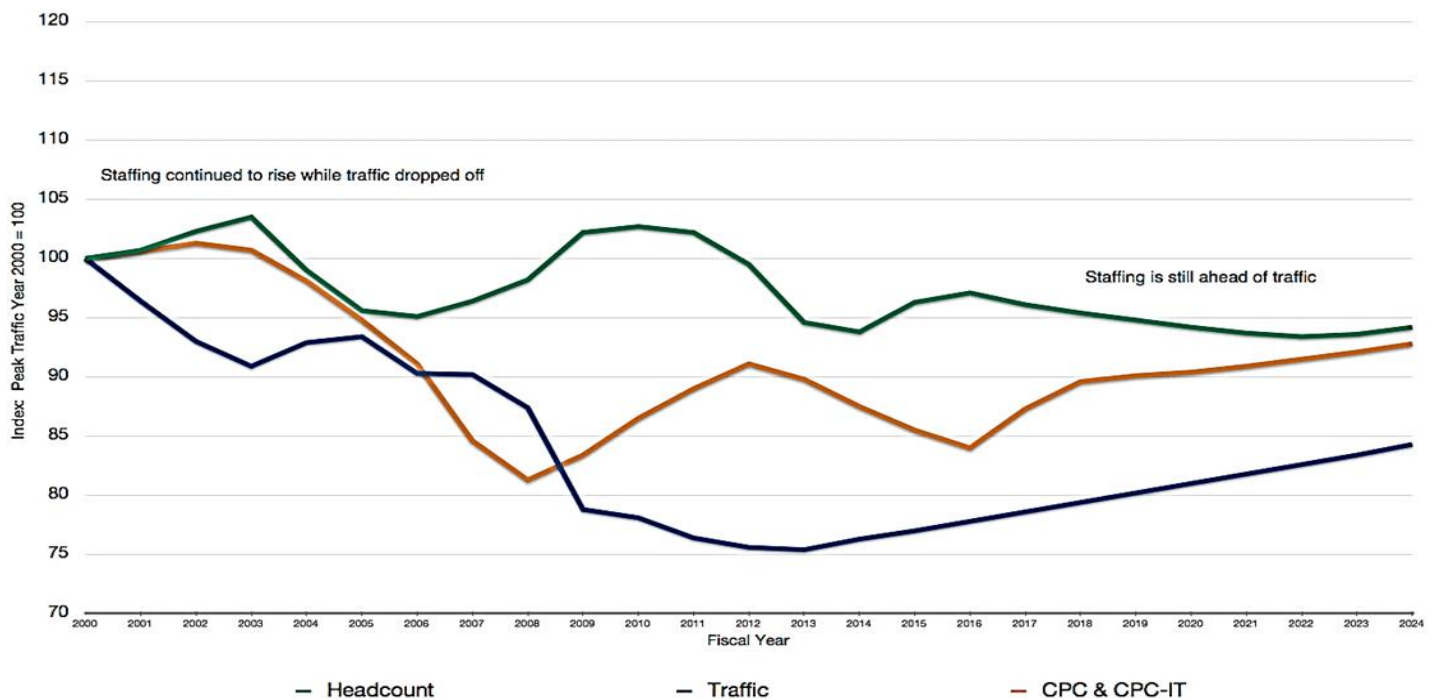# FAA Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan, 2015-2024

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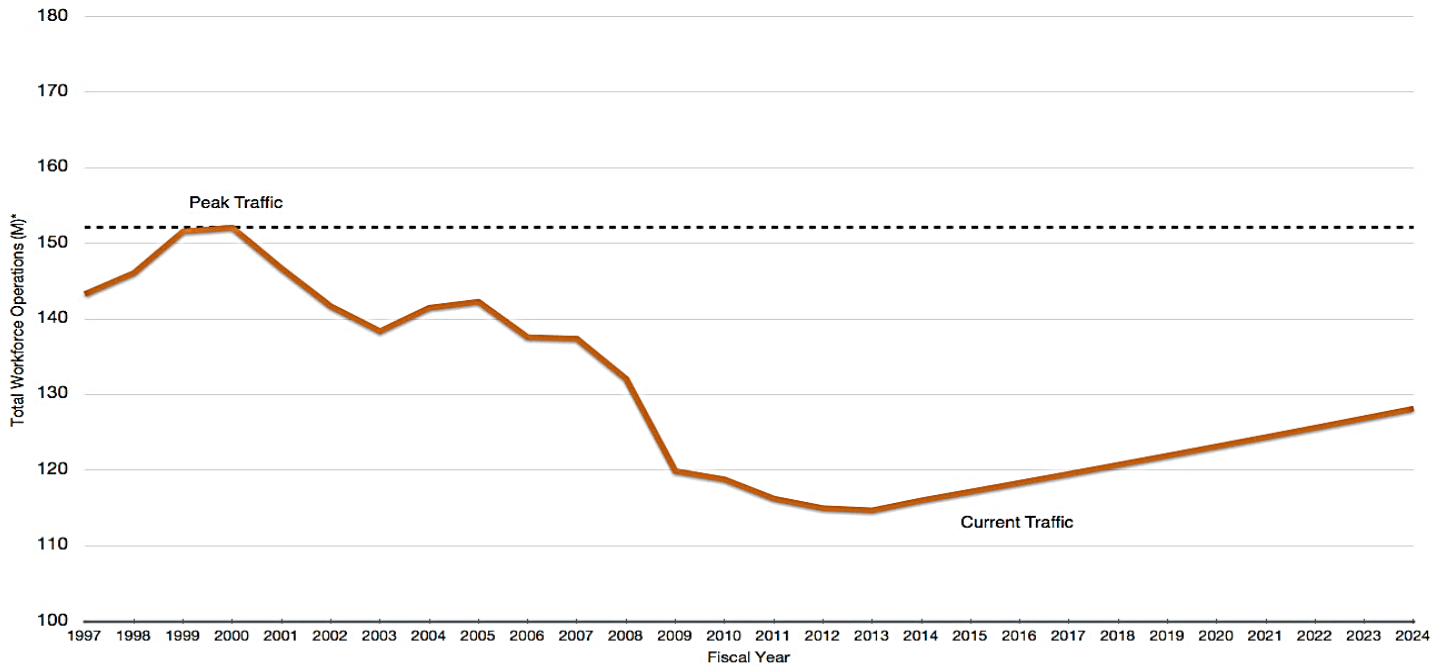
*Total Workforce Operations = Tower + TRACON + Aircraft Handled by En Route Centers

Source: FAA

System-wide Traffic and Total Controller Trends

Staffing continued to rise while traffic dropped off

Staffing is still ahead of traffic

— Headcount   — Traffic   — CPC & CPC-IT

Source: FAA

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