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INSIGHT

Nationwide Aircraft Ground Stop Raises Concerns over Aviation System Modernization

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On Friday afternoon, November 13, 2026, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered a nationwide ground stop that lasted approximately 4 hours and 45 minutes. FAA claimed that the order was issued "out of an abundance of caution" after its telecommunications network became unstable. The incident has heightened congressional interest in FAA oversight, funding, and related policies.

Effects on Air Traffic Operations

According to FAA, over 12,000 flights were canceled on November 13, including over 9,000 major airline flights. About 3,500 flights airborne at the time of ground stop were allowed to continue to their destinations, and inbound international flights were allowed to enter U.S. airspace and continue to their destinations during the ground stop. Flights were disrupted for days after the ground stop had been lifted, with about 6,700 cancellations reported on November 14 and more than 2,300 cancellations reported on November 15 as airlines worked to reconstitute their crew and aircraft schedules and accommodate stranded passengers.

Root Cause Investigation

FAA reported that 17 of its 22 Air Route Traffic Control Centers and several Terminal Radar Approach Control (TRACON) facilities were affected. FAA's initial investigation into the root cause of the network instability pointed to a scenario involving the installation of new routers at facilities in El Dorado, AR, and Amarillo, TX, that somehow flooded the network with large amounts of data that legacy systems installed at the 17 affected facilities were unable to handle.

Relationship to Air Traffic System Modernization Efforts

These router upgrades were part of FAA's efforts to migrate from legacy communications networks utilizing time division multiplexing (TDM) to more efficient internet protocol (IP) equipment. This migration is part of a strategy developed in 2015 to address the phaseout of TDM support by

telecommunications providers. The FAA is also in the process of upgrading legacy copper wiring with higher bandwidth and more robust fiber-optic telecommunications cables. While this work has been ongoing for several years, it was prioritized in May 2025 as an integral part of FAA's Brand New Air Traffic Control System (BNATCS) modernization initiative.

The existing FAA Telecommunications Infrastructure (FTI) interconnects FAA facilities and has been undergoing a multiyear modernization to replace outdated systems, including data servers and connections. According to L3 Harris, the primary contractor implementing these upgrades, 70% of FAA sites have been upgraded to fiber optics as of November 2, 2026.

The 2025 budget reconciliation act appropriated $12.5 billion for air traffic system modernization, including $4.75 billion for telecommunications infrastructure modernization and upgrades. In its FY2027 budget, FAA requested roughly $717 million for telecommunications infrastructure sustainment and modernization. According to FAA, this funding would support upgrades to existing FTI infrastructure as well as work to deploy its eventual replacement, the FAA Enterprise Network Services. Recent funding for these initiatives included $169.5 million in FY2025 and $303.2 million in FY2026 in addition to the $4.75 billion appropriated by P.L. 119-21.

Prior Ground Stops

Another ground stop, limited to the Northeast region, occurred on September 21, 2026, when a primary communications circuit at the Philadelphia TRACON facility failed while a secondary backup system was unavailable because a fiber-optic cable linked to that system had been severed earlier by railroad construction in New Jersey. The outage lasted about eight hours and prompted FAA to issue a ground stop affecting New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia area airports.

While localized ground stops occur with some frequency due to weather, equipment or power outages, and other circumstances impacting flight safety, nationwide ground stops are rare. Since 2000, FAA issued nationwide ground stops on two prior occasions:

- On January 11, 2023, FAA imposed a nationwide ground stop lasting for several hours after the Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) system, which provides safety-critical information to pilots and aircraft dispatchers, failed.
- Amid the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, FAA ordered a nationwide ground stop followed by orders directing all civil aircraft to land at the nearest airport and closing the airspace to civil aircraft for two days, reopening airspace on a limited basis to U.S. airlines on September 13, 2001.

Ground stops attributed to air traffic control (ATC) systems and operations, whether local or nationwide, may point to broader systemic issues and prompt scrutiny of ATC operations and modernization efforts.

Funding and Policy Considerations

The Modern Skies Act (S. 5572, H.R. 10683) seeks appropriations totaling $20.1 billion for ATC improvements. Following the November 13 event, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy urged Congress to appropriate $50 billion in emergency funding for ATC modernization, an increase from prior requests seeking $30 billion in addition to the $12.5 billion already appropriated by P.L. 119-21.

Some Members of Congress have pressed for oversight investigations and hearings to assess how funding already appropriated for these purposes is being managed and allocated, the status of ongoing contracts to modernize ATC systems, and FAA's ATC modernization plan and strategy. Details regarding BNATCS, which seeks to accelerate ATC modernization and complete related infrastructure upgrades by the end of 2028, have been limited. In December 2025, FAA awarded a contract to Peraton to be the prime integrator

overseeing BNATCS under a "first-of-its-kind" arrangement that incentivizes good performance but could penalize delays and poor performance. In September 2026, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) warned that FAA may be prioritizing implementation speed over life cycle costs and long-range planning for BNATCS. GAO raised concerns that this approach incurs risks of cost overruns, delays, unmet performance targets, and prolonged reliance on outdated systems that could impact ATC system efficiency and safety.

Congress might also revisit options to reform ATC functions, including options to establish a government-chartered air traffic corporation or a regulated private ATC entity like NAV CANADA, the not-for-profit corporation that provides air navigation services in Canada. Prior congressional proposals to establish a corporate ATC provider in the United States, including proposals offered during FAA reauthorization debate a decade ago, failed to advance. The first Trump Administration proposed shifting ATC functions to "an independent, non-governmental organization," but similar proposals have not been broadly discussed in the context of ongoing ATC modernization efforts.

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