

FAA Tech takes lead on NextGen research

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EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP — The William J. Hughes Technical Center has been at the forefront of the Federal Aviation Administration's research since its inception in 1954, evolving its mission as technology changes.

But now, as the agency is spearheading the latest innovation in air traffic control, it's fallen into the crosshairs of critics, including President Donald Trump, who've questioned the FAA's ability to lead.

Local politicians and center officials point out the many positives of research that federal officials hope will increase the air transportation system's capacity and reduce delays.

The goal of the more than \$20 billion Next Generation Air Transportation System is to switch the current air traffic control system from a radar-based transportation system to one that uses satellite navigation.

U.S. Rep Frank LoBiondo, R-2, said issues with the program, including cost problems and delays, should not be blamed on the work being done at the tech center.

"It's critically important to the future of the aviation industry," LoBiondo said. "The cost has been growing, the delays have been frequent and have nothing to do with the quality of work. It's very frustrating, our people continue to do an expert job and they are hampered by those in Washington."

NextGen is a system of sensors, based around automatic dependent surveillance-broadcast technology. The ADS-B technology lets air traffic control workers have a better idea of where craft are in the air.

Congress authorized planning for NextGen in 2003, with the goal of transforming the National Airspace System by 2025.

"An informed consumer is our best friend," said Jim Eck, assistant administrator for NextGen. "When you hear that NextGen is moving slower, there are a couple of reasons for that. More money and more stable funding means that we could plan better. "

Cost for NextGen has continued to increase since the project was first discussed in 2007.

The project is now expected to cost the federal government \$20.6 billion, up \$2.6 billion over FAA 2012 projections, but well within the cost estimate range. Overall, the project, counting the cost to the aviation industry, will top \$35.7 billion, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

In exchange, the NextGen project is expected to generate more than \$161 billion worth of benefits by 2030, according to officials at the tech center.

"The system will evolve over the next 10 years," Eck said. "We are eight years away from 2025 and we are trying to get everyone on the same page and keep them on the same page. We are still rolling technology out."

In the early 2000s, the ADS-B system was rolled out in Alaska.

The satellite-based tracking system helped reduce air traffic accidents in remote parts of Alaska by 43 percent, said J. Stuart Searight, branch manager of engineering development services division.

“ADS-B is a key building block for many NextGen systems,” Searight said. “Employees at the tech center have and will remain at the forefront of the development, testing and implementation of the ADS-B and the operations it enables.”

While FAA has not heard the exact amount of money that will be available for the program under the Trump Administration, Eck said he has been given reassurances that the funding for the program will continue.

“The secretary of transportation made it very clear to me that she thinks this is a top priority and that she wants to keep NextGen moving,” Eck said.

In addition to the criticizing the project, Trump has also suggested outsourcing traffic control, a move that could impact development of the system.

“All of these have to be considered when moving in that direction. The administration is interested in moving in that direction, the Congress is interested in moving in that direction,” Eck said. “But we are just at the beginning of those conversations.”