

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

June 18, 2019

The Honorable Gene Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
441 G Street NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) study how the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has considered community noise impacts while implementing the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) in major metropolitan areas. Specifically, we would like the GAO to review how the FAA measures aircraft noise, how it evaluates and mitigates noise impacts, and the extent to which the FAA conducts public outreach and responds to public comments regarding noise impacts.

The FAA's NextGen program aims to modernize the National Airspace System to increase the safety, efficiency, capacity, predictability, and resiliency of American aviation. As part of this effort, which began in 2007, the FAA has introduced new flight procedures that use satellite-based navigation in eleven major metropolitan areas with complex air traffic patterns, which the FAA calls "metroplexes." To date, the FAA has finished redesigning the airspace in the Northern and Southern California, Houston and North Texas, Atlanta, Charlotte, and Washington, D.C. metroplexes, and is designing and implementing redesigns in Cleveland-Detroit, Denver, Florida, and Las Vegas.

Each of these projects involved significant changes to existing routes and procedures. For example, in the Southern California Metroplex project, which includes 21 airports operating more than 2,800 daily scheduled flights and is the largest of the completed metroplex projects, the redesign included changes to almost 80 standard arrival and departure procedures. Changes in other metroplexes around the country were similarly broad.

For each of the completed projects in its Metroplex program, however, the FAA found that its proposed actions would not significantly affect the quality of human environment in the impacted metropolitan areas and would not result in significant noise impacts or reportable noise increases. Notwithstanding these findings, the new flight paths have caused significant concern in surrounding communities, and each of us have heard from constituents who are dealing with noise impacts.

Given the discrepancy between the FAA's findings and the concerns raised by affected communities, we request that the GAO study the FAA's consideration of aviation noise issues throughout the implementation of its NextGen program. Specifically, we ask that you address the following questions:

*Measuring, disclosing, and mitigating noise impacts—*

- (1) How does the FAA consider noise impacts when implementing new routes as part of its Metroplex initiative? Is the FAA consistent in how it considers and reports on noise impacts of NextGen and new flight paths across each different Metroplex project?
- (2) The FAA defines "significant increase in noise" as an increase in the Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) of 1.5 decibels or more over noise sensitive areas at or above the DNL 65-decibels noise exposure level. Do the FAA's criteria for whether changes in noise levels are considered significant sufficiently capture potential negative impacts? Given negative community response to new routes in

areas where the FAA did not find significant impacts would result, should the FAA revise its current metrics or develop alternative metrics to the current DNL standard?

- (3) Does the FAA measure and disclose noise impacts from changes to flight paths as adequately as it does noise impacts at airports?
- (4) Has the FAA become more effective at disclosing noise impacts from route changes since it began implementing NextGen? Has the FAA changed how it addresses noise impacts in response to litigation and settlements over flight path changes or requests from Congress?
- (5) In conducting environmental reviews of proposals for new or modified routes, has the FAA selected historical comparison data that fully and accurately captures flight paths before route changes? Have there been cases where the flight paths actually taken by aircraft changed significantly before the formal implementation of new routes associated with Metroplex implementation?

*Public outreach—*

- (6) How does the FAA communicate with the public and solicit and incorporate public input in planning and implementing its Metroplex initiative, including in developing new or modified arrival and departure procedures? Have the FAA's practices been adequate in the view of aviation stakeholders and community members?
- (7) How is the FAA measuring the adequacy of its public engagement and outreach when planning and implementing its Metroplex initiative?
- (8) Is the FAA's Instrument Flight Procedures (IFP) Information Gateway data portal sufficiently thorough, accessible, and transparent to communicate changes in flight paths and their potential community impacts with members of the public?
- (9) In cases where the FAA has settled litigation over proposed Metroplex route changes, did the FAA follow its own internal procedures in reaching settlement agreements and did it adequately consult with communities that would be affected by changes associated with those agreements before settling?

We appreciate your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Adam B. Schiff  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Peter A. DeFazio  
CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON  
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



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