

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-29](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Why GAO Did This Study

The use of small UAS—those weighing less than 55 pounds—continues to grow. As part of its safety mandate, FAA regulates and oversees UAS operations' compliance, which includes prohibiting small UAS operators from endangering the life or property of another, among other things. Recent airport closures attributed to UAS sightings highlight the unique challenges small UAS pose to aviation safety oversight.

GAO was asked to examine the integration of small UAS operations into FAA's safety oversight framework. This report examines: (1) how FAA's aviation safety inspectors conduct small UAS compliance and enforcement, and challenges they face in doing so, and (2) the extent to which FAA is planning for compliance and enforcement in an evolving UAS environment. GAO reviewed relevant statutes and regulations, FAA guidance and reports; and interviewed FAA officials including headquarters and aviation safety inspectors at 11 FAA district offices selected to obtain geographic distribution and other criteria. GAO also interviewed FAA law enforcement special agents and selected state or local law enforcement agencies in each district.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has three recommendations, including that FAA: (1) develop an approach to communicate to local law enforcement agencies expectations for their role in UAS investigations, and (2) identify and obtain data needed to evaluate FAA's small UAS compliance and enforcement activities, as the UAS environment evolves. FAA concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-20-29](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-2834 or Krauseh@gao.gov

Unmanned Aircraft Systems

FAA's Compliance and Enforcement Approach for Drones Could Benefit from Improved Communication and Data

What GAO Found

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) safety inspectors GAO met with said that law enforcement is an important source of information when they investigate potentially unsafe small unmanned aircraft systems' (UAS) operations. The inspectors also told GAO that they take actions to educate operators or enforce penalties, in line with FAA policies, but that they face several challenges, including obtaining key information for investigations. Inspectors explained that of the multiple sources that may provide information for UAS investigations, reports from state and local law enforcement generally provide the most useful and actionable information. However, most law enforcement stakeholders GAO met with (9 of 11) stated that officers may not know how to respond to UAS incidents or what information to share with FAA. While FAA has articulated the pivotal role local law enforcement can play, and has developed resources for these entities, FAA has not consistently communicated this information to its law enforcement partners. For example, while about half of the inspectors told us they regularly conduct outreach to law enforcement agencies, the remainder said their efforts have been limited. Without a clear approach to communicate to the tens of thousands of state and local law enforcement agencies across the country, FAA does not have reasonable assurance these agencies are armed with knowledge they need to help FAA identify and address unsafe UAS operations.

Examples of Locations and Sources for Information on Potentially Unsafe UAS Use



Source: GAO. | GAO-20-29

While FAA plans to continue its existing approach for small UAS safety oversight—focusing on operator education, targeted surveillance, and working with law enforcement—agency officials have not identified how they will use or improve existing data or considered whether additional data may be needed to assess their approach. FAA officials also said they will adjust their efforts moving forward based on semi-annual assessments of data. The agency, however, has not fully analyzed existing UAS safety data to identify trends in UAS incidents, and officials acknowledge these data have limitations (e.g., UAS data entries cannot be easily identified). In addition, FAA does not currently have plans to determine what existing or new data or information could help inform whether FAA's oversight efforts are working as intended. Taking steps to identify and obtain key data will enable FAA to assess its existing approach and determine what further activities, if any, it should undertake to ensure safety. These steps will be important as the number and type of UAS operations the agency is responsible for overseeing expands.