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Labor union blasts FAA's new navigation approach

By Aliya Sternstein *National Journal's Technology Daily* October 17, 2007

A labor union that represents Federal Aviation Administration workers is criticizing a contract the agency recently awarded for a satellite-based navigation program, claiming that the approach may impair aviation safety.

Tom Brantley, president of the Professional Airways Systems Specialists, said in written testimony that the contract to implement the Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) system, which will replace the current radar system -- and "could be a very useful tool" for increasing airspace capacity -- "places control of the system entirely in the hands of the vendor."

The approach "is one that discounts decades of responsibly ensuring the safety of the flying public," he said at a Wednesday hearing.

Brantley and other officials involved in the program testified before the Transportation and Infrastructure Aviation Subcommittee about the contract awarded to ITT in August. The goal of ADS-B is to enable more precise flight navigation, thereby permitting airplanes to fly closer to one another without colliding. The system will use signals from global positioning system data instead of radar data to pinpoint flight position.

ADS-B has been estimated to save the FAA \$5 billion between 2007 and 2035. The FAA's cost for nationwide service through 2025 is estimated at \$1.9 billion, and the agency anticipates significant savings from decommissioning many secondary surveillance radars around 2020.

Brantley said he is troubled by the "severe cut in redundancy" that retiring radars would bring. He said he also is disturbed by the FAA's documented history of troubled contract management -- a point the Transportation Department's inspector general noted in his written testimony.

Much of Brantley's testimony focused on the elimination of FAA certification -- or the process in which an FAA employee checks and tests equipment periodically to ensure the parts can be safely returned to service and do not negatively impact any aspect of the national airspace system. Radar always has been certified by the FAA.

"Without a true certification of ADS-B, the controllers will have to rely on [pilots or the contractor] to tell the FAA that the service is wrong," Brantley said.

Transportation IG Calvin Scovel noted that the type of award -- a service contract -- means the government will only own the service, not the infrastructure. FAA will certify the service.

Because FAA will not own the architecture, Scovel said, "We are concerned that FAA could find itself in a situation where it knows very little about the system that is expected to be the foundation of NextGen [navigation]."

ITT has a 60-year history of work in air-traffic control technology, said ITT program manager John Kefaliotis. He added that the contract provides for "continuous government monitoring" and "significant financial incentives for performance" during the deployment and operational phases.

FAA's Vincent Capezzuto testified that the contract is structured as it is to ensure "long-term buy-in by the contractor and the industry while the FAA retains control over system performance and data transmitted." He added, "FAA is a safety oversight agency, first and foremost, and the certification of the data is critical to our mission."

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