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Ongoing Sequester Will Challenge NextGen, FAA Chief Says

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by BILL CAREY

FAA Administrator Michael Huerta (center) addresses the NextGen Advisory Committee with new FAA deputy administrator Michael Whitaker (left) and the chairman of the NAC and Alaska Air Group, Bill Ayer. (Photo: Bill Carey) June 10, 2013, 11:10 AM

Continuing annual budget reductions due to the sequester process in theU.S. will make it difficult for the Federal Aviation Administration to complete the enabling programs of the NextGen ATC modernization effort on time, FAA Administrator Michael Huerta told the NextGen Advisory Committee (NAC) on June 4. In April, the U.S. Congress passed legislation that gave the FAA flexibility to reallocate money and help restart one such program, he said. But the legislation stays in effect only for the balance of Fiscal Year 2013, which ends on September30.

Unless the Congress reverses it, the sequester will amount to a 10-year budget-cutting exercise that affects both civil agencies and the Department of Defense. The measure threatens the FAAs NextGen effort not so much by reducing funding for equipment in the agencys facilities and equipment account, but by depleting the manpower needed to help develop and operate new systems, including air traffic controllers and technicians. Seven NextGen programs exist in various stages of implementation, Huertasaid.

These programs are current contract commitments that will deliver new capabilities for all phases of flight by 2018, he said. The budget profile even under sequester would provide capital funding required to meet most of those commitments. But to make this happen, we also have to have the operations funds to maintain active work force participation in key activities. If were not able to keep that work force engagement, its very difficult to meet all of our current commitments and the associated time linesIts one thing to deploy a system; its quite another thing to make itoperational.

When the sequester took effect on March 1, theFAA sought to cut costs by requiring controllers to take unpaid leave, or furlough days. It also announced that 149 contract ATC towers at small airports would close. Passed by Congress in April, the Reducing Flight Delays Act of 2013 authorized the FAA to shift $253 million from the Airport Improvement Program, which lawmakers had previously exempted from the sequester, into its operations and facilities and equipment accounts. The agency then canceled the furloughs and contract towerclosings.

Huerta said the legislation also freed $10 million in funds to prevent delays in core NextGen programs. The money helped restart suspended parts of the Optimization of Airspace and Procedures in the Metroplex (OAPM) program. The OAPM effort aims to improve air traffic flows in congested metroplex regions with multiple large airports. Study teams consisting of the FAA, airline representatives and other stakeholders meet to identify efficiency gains through measures such as adjusting airspace sectors and implementing advanced navigation procedures. The

FAA
recalled controllers and managers assigned to metroplex projects to their home facilities until fundingresumed.

TheFAAs new deputy administrator, Michael Whitaker, accompanied Huerta to theNAC meeting in Washington,
D.C.
Whitaker now serves as the agencys chief NextGen officer, a role Huerta previously held. A former United Airlines and
TWA
executive, he most recently worked for InterGlobe Enterprises, an airline management and travel services company that operates Indian low-fare carrierIndiGo.