

HAPPY FLYING THIS WEEKEND - WHO NEEDS ALL THOSE METEOROLOGISTS?



National Airspace System regional air traffic control hubs

From the GAO yesterday, via Government Executive:

National Weather Service meteorologists who assist air traffic controllers are working overtime, skipping leave and taking on more responsibilities due to worsening staff shortages, according to a Government Accountability Office report published Thursday, which criticized the Federal Aviation Administration for not doing enough in response to the problem.

“Not having identified and addressed the risks of the current staffing levels is concerning given the potential safety effects if aviation meteorologists are overworked and the quality of their services to air traffic controllers is diminished,” investigators wrote.

Well **that** doesn't sound good. What exactly do they mean by “diminished”?

As of June, NWS said the aviation meteorologist workforce is down to 69 employees, partly as a result of the federal hiring freeze and separation incentive programs like deferred resignation. FAA and NWS in February agreed to a cap of 81 full-time equivalents for such positions. (In 2024, prior to the agreement, the report said that the FAA was pushing to lower that number to 71.)

Under a 2016 interagency agreement between FAA and NWS, there are supposed to be three meteorologists and one meteorologist in charge at each of the 21 air route traffic control centers across the U.S. But that is not achievable under the February agreement.

GAO reported that the control center in Oakland, Calif., is down to one meteorologist, another four centers have only two such employees and five centers don't have a meteorologist in charge.

OK, you've got my attention now. I used to live in Oakland and then elsewhere in the East Bay, and this is nuts.

But let's back up a minute, to make a few things clear. The FAA has facilities in every airport air traffic control tower. These folks handle takeoffs, landings, ground control on the taxiways, and other local issues. These are not the places this report is discussing. The FAA also has 21 regional air traffic control facilities that handle regional air traffic flow (see the map above). These are the facilities that worry the GAO.

Suppose you are flying from Denver to Oakland. When you take off, the Denver tower is in charge. Once you reach a certain altitude/distance from the airport, the pilot switches over to the Denver regional National Airspace System [NAS] hub for instructions and

guidance. As you fly west, the Denver hub passes control to the Salt Lake City hub, and eventually to the Oakland regional hub. Finally, as you approach the Oakland airport, the pilot contacts the Oakland airport control tower for the final approach and landing.

Each of these regional NAS hubs, in the course of handling traffic issues, pays a lot of attention to the weather. Ever hit turbulence or storms? The meteorologists can predict where they are likely to appear, and (depending on severity) the NAS controllers then can either warn the pilots to expect minor turbulence in a particular area, or route the flights around that area if it is deemed severe.

So let's go back to that Denver to Oakland flight.

The Rocky Mountains can create a *lot* of turbulence. Especially in the summer. Like during the Labor Day weekend. As you fly west, you come to other smaller but similar areas, like the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California and ultimately the hills and mountains that surround the San Francisco Bay. Complicating things, the SF Bay has three major commercial airports – SF, Oakland, and San Jose – as well as dozens of smaller municipal fields, private corporate airstrips, and military bases. In other words, there is a lot of air traffic in a relatively small area.

And according to the GAO, the Oakland regional air traffic control hub, instead of having four meteorologists, is down to just one.

One.

And it's not like that one can clock out at 5pm and tell all the planes to tune in to "weather on the 8's" on the radio or the 5:15 weather report on the KRON evening news to get updates they need.

I've had the pleasure of being the pastor to more than a few NWS meteorologists, and they have told me in detail about their love for

their work. I've rejoiced with them when their severe weather warnings have saved lives, even when a tornado blows a town to bits. Over the last six months, I've also grieved with them as they have seen their agency stretched beyond the breaking point. Some of their friends have been let go as "redundant" or "wasteful", others are fearing that they may be next to get the axe or be forced to relocate themselves and their families, and *everyone* is working far more than is healthy. We're talking vacations cancelled, days off postponed, and suddenly having to work a double shift.

And it's been like this for half a year, with no end in sight.

From the GAO report:

The NAS [National Airspace System] is currently under tremendous strain as air traffic controller shortages and periodic equipment failures in aging air traffic control systems have been leading to delayed and canceled flights. We and others have reported on these challenges, and we currently have ongoing work in these areas.¹¹ Severe weather can exacerbate such strains on the NAS as FAA reports that weather is the leading cause of cancellations and delays.¹² Multiple stressors on the NAS can lead to compounded adverse conditions for passengers. For example, the widespread delays and cancellations Southwest Airlines experienced in December 2022 began with weather problems that were compounded by carrier system failures.¹³

The purpose of this report is to inform you and Congress about another stressor on the NAS—concerns about aviation meteorologist staffing levels—which we identified in our ongoing work on aviation operational preparedness.¹⁴ These meteorologists work directly with air traffic controllers in the command

center and en route centers, providing face-to-face briefings as necessary, and helping them safely direct flights to avoid severe weather. We recognize that determining the appropriate weather forecasting resources to effectively support the safe and efficient operation of the NAS may take time to examine in depth. However, given the urgency of the issues, and that the interagency agreement is scheduled to expire in September 2025, we are sharing this information with you now.

This report from the GAO is a flashing red light, a bone-chilling siren, trying to get the attention of people with the power to change things. I only hope it works.

Given that we're talking about a government headed by a guy who thinks he is smarter than all the meteorologists at the National Hurricane Center and the NWS, and can predict the path of hurricanes simply by using his sharpie, I am not confident things will change at all.

Here's hoping the worst the flying public has to deal with this weekend are baggage problems and seats with cramped leg room.