Technology

Trump administration to unveil overhaul of air traffic control system amid agency cuts

Transportation Secretary Sean P. Duffy is expected to announce a multi-billion modernization plan, after an exodus of FAA leaders.

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President Donald Trump's administration is preparing to spend billions in the latest bid to fix America's outdated and understaffed air traffic control system, but his team will have to launch the plan under a Federal Aviation Administration with its leadership decimated by Trump's own policies and its remaining staff demoralized.

A crisis at Newark Airport that unfolded over the last week — including a communications outage between a control facility and incoming planes that caused air traffic controllers to take trauma leave from their jobs — was just the latest example of dangers that have been the subject of warnings for decades.

On Thursday, Transportation Secretary Sean P. Duffy is expected to unveil the latest plan to replace old communications and tracking equipment with a modern system. But Duffy will be attempting to build the new system without key career FAA leaders, who are departing en masse in personnel cuts engineered by Elon Musk and his U.S. DOGE Service.

Complicating the task is the uncertain status of an outside company that has been working on a system upgrade. Musk and FAA leadership have cast doubt about the ability of Verizon, the current outside contractor tasked with overhauling the air traffic control communication network, to get the job done after years of planning under a $2.4 billion contract. Musk has said his Starlink satellite internet service could help and that he would donate terminals to the government, raising conflict of interest questions, but the extent of Starlink's involvement remains unclear.

"To begin to take on massive changes in the national airspace system, we're going to need all hands on deck," said Dave Spero, the president of the FAA's Professional Aviation Safety Specialists union. "All of that uncertainty right now muddies the water."

Thousands of flights were delayed in the most recent episode at Newark Airport, where a closed runway exacerbated problems. But issues that brought a major international airport to a crawl have been long documented throughout the national system by experts and government watchdogs.

The agency has pumped billions into its next generation air traffic control system, as documented by numerous government reports. Yet, the agency has often struggled to haul itself into the 21st century, making do with strips of paper, floppy disks and copper phone lines holding together a sprawling web of vintage radars, radios and computer systems. Air traffic controllers show up for work in 1960s buildings with leaking roofs and sorely in need of new heating and plumbing.

Gene Hayman, chief executive of Stratify Aerospace and longtime aviation executive, said the system has become so tangled it will be difficult to overhaul.

"You can't ever shut anything off," Hayman said. "You have to keep things running while you're building the new stuff."

Duffy is determined to try. A 53 year-old former congressman and reality TV personality, he was confirmed by the Senate the day before the country's first airline crash in more than 15 years. An Army helicopter collided with an American Airlines flight near Washington Reagan National Airport, killing 67 people, delivering a stark reminder that the nation's aviation safety record could not be taken for granted.

Duffy has been blunt about the problems faced by the FAA — the largest agency under his control — and in an administration devoted to cutting costs, he said he has been able to secure the promise of new funding from the administration.

"I started to look at the air traffic control system and very quickly, I saw one piece of the pie where there was issues, then scratched further, and there was another piece of the pie," Duffy told reporters outside the White House Tuesday. "And as we looked at it we see the whole system needs to be redone. We need to build a brand new air traffic control system."

The FAA said in a statement that while it had made upgrades in recent decades, almost all of its funding was dedicated to keeping existing equipment running rather than investing in new technology. Budget requests in recent years show it has sought millions of dollars from Congress to, among other things, acquire floppy disk drives.

The agency said this week it would be able to manage staff turnover and deliver on Duffy's plan.

"We have a deep reserve of experienced talent and we ensure orderly transitions by continuously training people to move up and assume leadership roles," the statement said.

A spokesman for Duffy declined to share details of his plans before they were scheduled to be announced at a news conference Thursday afternoon. Trump said at a cabinet meeting last week that air traffic control equipment was "horrible" and that he wanted a system that was "brand new." A preview of Trump's proposed budget released Friday included a $1.2 billion boost for air traffic control; a key House committee last week approved $12.5 billion as part of a funding bill.

To kick-start the modernization work, the FAA brought in employees from Musk's rocket company SpaceX to provide advice. But as they got to work The Washington Post and other outlets reported that officials were exploring turning over communications programs TO Musk's Starlink satellite venture.

At the end of February, according to a memo obtained by The Post, FAA officials recommended ending a major program to modernize the agency's communications backbone that was contracted out to Verizon. Musk warned on X that the system it was supposed to replace was "single digit months to catastrophic failure, putting air traveler safety at serious risk." So, he said, he was providing gear from his satellite internet venture Starlink to help "at no cost."

In March, Chris Rocheleau, the agency's acting administrator, rejected the recommendation to terminate the $2.4 billion Verizon program. But in the memo he acknowledged it "cannot continue as currently envisioned" and said he would waive some reviews to speed along a reconfigured project. Duffy has said that Starlink will not be the single solution to the FAA's problems.

Verizon did not respond to a request for comment.

Duffy has also sought to boost air traffic controller hiring, the agency's other major long-standing problem, streamlining the application process, offering bonuses and raising training pay. But even as he has talked about recruiting in the "best and brightest," Duffy has also worked toward Trump's goal of drastically reducing the number of federal workers.

Inside the agency, that has created a strange dissonance. Employees described an increasingly chaotic work environment where employees constantly worry about who will be next to lose their job and where top leaders are making decisions that seem contradictory.

"One day, we're going [to] be required to fire 20 percent of everybody," said one senior FAA manager, who like many agency employees requested anonymity because of concerns of retaliation. "And the next day, Sean Duffy says we're going to have a huge injection of tens of billions of dollars. It's just weird."

Without evidence in the wake of January's deadly collision in Washington, Trump seemed to target FAA employees, blaming diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in government agencies for the crash.

The FAA employed 46,000 people at the end of February, the most recent figures available. Almost 14,000 of them are air traffic controllers who have been shielded from layoffs and were not eligible for a deferred departure program.

In the administration's first weeks, officials terminated about 400 probationary FAA employees. Duffy protected air traffic controllers from those cuts, but Democratic lawmakers warned they would still jeopardize safety. A judge subsequently ordered the employees rehired.

More recently, the department has been encouraging workers to leave under a program known as "deferred resignation," which allows them to stop working but remain on the payroll through September.

As that program rolls out, the FAA is losing not only its chief air traffic official, Tim Arel, but also its associate administrator for commercial space, his deputy, the director of the audit and evaluation office, the assistant administrator for civil rights and the assistant administrator for finance and management, according to four employees at the agency.

The Air Traffic Organization, which is responsible for the safety of U.S. airspace as the operational arm of the FAA, is losing the vice presidents and deputy vice presidents of five major programs including technical operations, mission support and safety and technical training, per an email obtained by The Post.

Arel did not respond to a request for comment.

The job losses could continue. Duffy said in a town hall for Transportation Department employees last week that he was planning layoffs at the end of the month, with the exact numbers depending on how many people take the voluntary program.

"I know this has been hard for people," Duffy said. "I know there's been a lot of stress."

In interviews, numerous FAA employees said they were scared and fatigued, predicting that the consequences of the blizzard of departures will be far-reaching. All of the employees spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation and because they were not authorized to discuss personnel issues publicly. As staff exit, those left behind are struggling to pick up a suddenly massive workload, said one employee — and managers are not helping.

The number of high-level leaders fleeing the agency is especially concerning, another employee said.

"When it comes time to getting a final decision, a final answer, getting something over the finish line, that's where having good leadership is so important," the employee said. "And that's where it's going to be so much harder ... stuff just won't get done in a timely manner."

A review of more than 20 government oversight reports dating back almost half a century shows the agency has repeatedly struggled to modernize its air-traffic systems.

The FAA's work to overhaul air-traffic control traces back to 1981, when it estimated the effort would cost $12 billion over 10 years. The Government Accountability Office, a congressional watchdog, twice designated the overhaul a "high-risk" project in the 1990s. By 2003, two decades and $35 billion after beginning the effort, the FAA's cost estimate had ballooned to $51 billion and was 16 years behind schedule. The same year, the FAA began transforming its radar-based system to draw on satellite navigation to expand its capacity and improve safety.

Last fall, the GAO issued its strongest call to action. After the FAA was forced to briefly ground planes nationally in 2023 due to a system outage — for the first time since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks — the agency determined that about 75 percent of its systems were either unsustainable or potentially unsustainable. Of those, the GAO said, more than half "have critical operational impacts on the safety and efficiency of the national airspace."