

Waypoint: FAA Technicians Benched In Radar Upgrade

Bill Carey September 14, 2026



Technicians ready surface movement radar antenna for installation at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in August.

Credit: FAA

The union that represents FAA employees who install and maintain air traffic control equipment is concerned that its members are being prevented from helping with one of the most ambitious efforts of the Brand New Air Traffic Control System (BNATCS) initiative—upgrading 612 primary and secondary surveillance radars during the current Trump administration.

As of September, the FAA reported that nine new radar systems have been deployed under the Radar System Replacement Program, barely moving the needle at 1.4% of goal.

“We have nine radars that are installed, and our technicians have virtually no technical training on those systems right now,” says Dave Spero, national president of the [Professional Aviation Safety Specialists](#) (PASS). “They’re not even allowed to work on the equipment.”

PASS says it represents 11,000 FAA and Defense Department employees, including FAA Tech Ops engineers and technicians who install, operate, maintain and repair radar systems and other equipment. The union has a dedicated representative for the BNATCS effort and has established “a slate of front-line union members to provide oversight, workforce advocacy and operational insight throughout the program’s development and deployment.”

Aviation Week spoke with Spero in mid-August as [the FAA celebrated](#) successive installations of [new surface movement radars at Newark Liberty International Airport](#) in New Jersey and [Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport](#) (DCA) in Virginia.

DCA was the fifth airport to receive the new Surface Movement Radar Model 4 (SMR-4). The SMR program falls within the BNATCS portfolio of modernization programs, but it is separate from the Radar System Replacement Program.

The FAA awarded Saab’s Syracuse, N.Y.-based subsidiary a \$267 million contract in September 2025 to replace 53 surface movement radars at 44 of the busiest U.S. airports and three support facilities with new SMR-4 versions. They replace legacy ASDE-3 and improved surface movement radars (SMRi).

There is a 10-month timeline involved in deploying a new surface movement radar to an airport, Spero says: eight months of project management and outreach to the site and two months of physical work on-site before an old radar is removed and a new radar commissioned.

“We’ve been involved in this SMR program from the beginning,” Spero says of PASS. “Our local folks are also a part of the preparation and the installation and optimization of the equipment. It’s gone well. This is a good example of how things can go well given the old standards of how things used to be.”

In December 2025, the FAA awarded national security technology company Peraton a reported \$1.5-billion contract to act as “prime integrator” of the BNATCS modernization portfolio. At an industry conference earlier this year, a Peraton executive said the company is applying “revolutionary agentic AI technology ... to manage this program at a speed and scale that is simply impossible for humans alone.”

An agentic AI system is a proactive artificial intelligence system that autonomously makes decisions and takes actions to achieve specific objectives with minimal human intervention. “Risks are caught before they become crises, schedules are stress-tested before they break, supply chain gaps are flagged before they cause delays,” the Peraton executive said.

Radar System Replacement

Following Peraton’s selection as prime integrator, the FAA announced in January 2026 that it had awarded RTX and Indra contracts of \$438 million and \$342 million, respectively, to deliver Lot 1 of the Radar System Replacement Program.

Spero says PASS members have been involved in rolling out new SMR-4 radars that track aircraft and vehicles on the airport surface. But they have not fully participated in deploying new primary and secondary surveillance radars that track and interact with aircraft in the air. The FAA’s technicians have been sidelined, he says, because the contracts awarded to Indra and RTX require the companies to maintain their equipment for two years.

“Peraton is the overseer of all of this; they’re the integrator,” Spero says. “The process isn’t going as smoothly as what’s going on with the SMR [program], and one of the primary reasons, in my opinion, is that they’re not training our technicians. That is causing our technicians who are in the field to not be able to be a force multiplier. They’re not as useful in the optimization and installation of the equipment as our folks are in the SMR program.”

Indra and RTX declined to comment on specifics of their contracts and referred questions to the FAA, which did not respond to an inquiry.

“I have expressed my displeasure to FAA leadership that they’re not training our folks and it’s going to cause this program to slow down at some point,” Spero says. “We have 2000 technicians that probably can be useful and helpful in the installation. Instead, we’re out there handing them our tools, letting them in the door, escorting them.”

PASS alludes to Spero’s concerns in a cautionary posting on its website published in June.

“The FAA’s ambitious plans to modernize the nation’s air traffic control system represents one of the most significant efforts impacting the National Airspace System and the FAA Technical Operations workforce responsible for maintaining it,” the union said. “Since the modernization efforts began, the agenda has moved forward at a rapid pace, reshaping long-standing processes and expectations, and this accelerated timeline is already having real impacts on employees.”

The post adds: “The installation phase of BNATCS presents a valuable opportunity for hands-on training prior to on-the-job training. Equally important, technicians must take ownership of their sites and equipment to ensure long-term operational success and safety for the American flying public.”

[U.S. FAA](#) [RTX](#) [AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL](#)