**NextGen Umbrella**

FAA sets up management organization to advance critical technology developments

**JENNIFER MICHELS/WASHINGTON**

Just a day before the U.S. Transportation Department’s inspector general issued a report finding the FAA to be at fault for serious cost overruns and schedule delays in deploying the NextGen air traffic modernization system, FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt announced the agency will be realigning some functions that should positively impact deployment of systems critical to NextGen.

Babbitt, the opening speaker Oct. 3 at the Air Traffic Control Association’s (ATCA) 56th Annual Conference near here, said Congress recently approved the agency’s request to set up a Program Management Organization (PMO) within the FAA’s Air Traffic Organization (ATO), a proposal submitted over the summer that will be the bridge between strategic requirements and tactical program implementation. “Currently, air traffic acquisitions managers are embedded in different offices. Soon, they will all be in one place. Having a portfolio of programs under one umbrella provides the potential for streamlining, better cost control and economies of scale,” Babbitt said.

Also, a new NextGen office head will report directly to FAA Deputy Administrator Michael Huerta and work to raise awareness of NextGen within the agency and the industry. Greg Burke, vice president of en route and oceanic services, has been on special assignment to create the PMO and could be under consideration, or already tapped, to run it. There has been no official word on that yet.

Meanwhile, the creation of a NextGen office allowed the agency to create an assistant secretary position, to which Victoria Cox was promoted. She was formerly senior vice president for NextGen and operations planning and previously served as the director of the ATO’s Operations Planning International Office.

While Babbitt revealed some specifics on the restructuring, he was not able to guarantee the future of the Joint Planning and Development Office (JPDO), which basically created NextGen and is the main liaison among civil and military and homeland security stakeholders. That is because it is up to Congress to continue funding the JPDO. The House Appropriation’s transportation, housing and urban development subcommittee has zeroed out funding for the JPDO in pending funding legislation while the Senate, in fiscal 2011 appropriations, reduced it to $6.5 million from $13.7 million.

The executive director of the NextGen Institute, Michael Garvin, believes the JPDO is essential to further technology improvements. “It is a critical piece and should be fully funded,” especially for its role in creating one vision among several agencies, he says.

As for the new PMO, Babbitt said several infrastructure programs that support NextGen will be moved into it, such as En Route Automation Modernization (ERAM) and Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B).

Rick Ducharme, senior vice president of operations for the ATO, says the FAA is taking “the middle layer” out of parts of the agency. “We’ve narrowed the lines of decision-making.” Some of this has been known, such as linking air traffic controller training with safety, but many attending the ATCA conference seemed eager to learn more about the changes, which had not been widely articulated to FAA or ATO staff early last week.

Asked how the FAA is going to break down the cultural barriers within the agency to integrate major functions (which have operated independently for some time), ATO COO David Grizzle answers, “Greg Burke is going to use me and Rick Ducharme as battering rams.” He went on to say that people or programs will come out of their silos and work together because they will not have the resources they once had.

Grizzle says organizations as a whole
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tend to spend more creative energy on drafting plans than executing them. However, the person who dreams up the newest plan and gets all the credit usually moves on to the next, better job created because of that plan, and the burden of delivering it operationally falls on the shoulders of “some other poor bloke.” That is why he is proud of the implementation now in progress to execute these “very sound plans already developed by our predecessors,” Grizzle says.

And there are some large plans to implement. The FAA has already spent $2 billion on ERAM, and there are still 18 en route centers yet to achieve operational readiness. While this technically is not a program that falls under NextGen, Grizzle says it is the “chassis on which all of the NextGen functionalities will be bolted.”

Meanwhile, ADS-B is essential to moving the nation’s air system forward. And many more programs are progressing in concert, such as system-wide information management (SWIM) and DataComm, which replaces most voice communications with digital data messages to reduce voice errors, leading to shorter taxi times and fewer ground delays.

“I’m intensely focused on increasing the probability that we’ll fulfill all of our current commitments,” Grizzle says, which is why the FAA has realigned the ATO with a focus on operations. “The FAA-wide changes will go a long way toward making us one FAA as opposed to independent and often feuding activities all housed at 800 Independence Avenue.”

Grizzle also notes that “the PMO will be a single point of contact for vendors,” and there will be an office whose primary task is to meet with industry suppliers to discuss how their products will serve program operational needs.

As for its people, Grizzle says the FAA will be asking managers to shift from a focus on policy compliance to become “leaders guided by principle. It is more about how you conduct yourself” and less about punching a time clock. Top-level managers are not going to tinker with everything, which he says he finds counter-intuitive. “We are accustomed to near perfection. But that is not only futile, it can be the enemy of progress,” he says.

Controllers will see changes in their training as well; Babbitt has accepted a set of recommendations from a blue-ribbon panel he convened to study train-

ing as part of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association’s (Natca) Call to Action on professionalism. “This report shows us we are doing a great job, but there are things we can and will do better,” Babbitt said. The panel’s 50 recommendations, which can be found at www.faa.gov, include developing standardized advanced as well as refresher courses for controllers, and creating mobile simulator labs for controllers in smaller facilities.

Babbitt said changes will affect overall training, which involves how the FAA supervises and maintains standards for all towers. According to Trish Gilbert, Natca executive vice president, there is a pressing need for these changes because of the current workforce. “We have a big turnover right now. Of 15,000 controllers, 4,000 have less than four years’ [experience],” she says.

Of FAA reauthorization, which has been extended for the 22nd time, through January, Babbitt said, “Lately we’ve been waiting to see what next week will bring us.” But the only way to make consistent improvements to the system and move NextGen forward is to “have a clear path of funding.”