

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106374](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard, a multi-mission military service within the Department of Homeland Security, is responsible for protecting and defending more than 100,000 miles of U.S. coastline and inland waterways. It relies heavily on its fleet of about 200 aircraft to do so.

Several of the Coast Guard's aircraft are approaching the end of their original service lives. The Coast Guard is amid a multibillion-dollar acquisition effort to modernize its aircraft fleet. It has also reported challenges maintaining a sufficient workforce to meet its growing mission demands.

The James N. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for GAO to review issues related to Coast Guard aircraft availability. This report examines, among other things, (1) the extent Coast Guard aircraft met operational availability targets, (2) Coast Guard efforts to modernize its aircraft fleet, and (3) the extent it has determined its aviation-related workforce needs.

GAO analyzed Coast Guard documentation and data on aircraft availability, acquisitions, and aviation workforce. GAO also interviewed Coast Guard officials, including those representing eight of 25 air stations with a mix of aircraft and geographic locations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that the Coast Guard assess the type and number of helicopters, and aviation workforce size, needed to meet mission demands. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106374](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or macleodh@gao.gov.

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COAST GUARD

Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed

What GAO Found

The U.S. Coast Guard relies on its aircraft to support its many missions, using them most heavily for search and rescue. However, its aircraft generally did not meet the Coast Guard's 71 percent availability target during fiscal years 2018 through 2022. Specifically, the aircraft fleet availability ranged from 66 percent to 68 percent during this timeframe. The Coast Guard set this target to help ensure a high probability that its air stations can deploy at least one aircraft on short notice for search and rescue. Coast Guard officials attributed the aircraft fleet generally not meeting availability targets to maintenance and repair challenges.

Coast Guard Aircraft



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photos. | GAO-24-106374

As of January 2024, the Coast Guard had four programs underway to modernize its aircraft and help ensure they are available for operations in the coming decades, at an estimated cost of \$105.6 billion. These programs were generally meeting their approved cost and schedule baselines. One of these programs aims to consolidate the fleet from 98 short-range and 48 medium-range helicopters to an all medium-range helicopter fleet. This would reduce the fleet size from 146 to at least 127 total helicopters.

However, the Coast Guard has not fully assessed whether this transition will result in the type and quantity of helicopters needed to meet its mission demands. For example, it has not conducted an analysis of alternatives—an analytical study comparing the operational effectiveness, costs, and risks—to determine the best suited aircraft to meet mission needs. Assessing different helicopters using such an analysis would help the Coast Guard determine the best alternative to replace its short-range helicopter. Additionally, a fleet mix analysis would help ensure it identifies the necessary number of helicopters it requires to meet its mission demands.

As of July 2023, the Coast Guard had 387 of 4,134 (9 percent) of its authorized military aviation workforce positions vacant. However, the Coast Guard has not fully determined its aviation workforce needs. Coast Guard guidance calls for the Coast Guard to assess and determine necessary staffing levels and skills to meet mission needs. This may be higher or lower than the number of its authorized positions. The Coast Guard has not used this process for a large portion of its aviation workforce, including all 25 of its air stations and its major aircraft repair facility. Until such analysis is completed, the Coast Guard will not fully understand the resources it requires for its aviation units.