

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107697](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

FAA manages a portfolio of congressionally funded R&D programs supporting policymaking, planning, and standards development. FAA annually produces two statutorily required documents for Congress related to its R&D portfolio: *The National Aviation Research Plan* and the *Research and Development Annual Review*. These reports provide a forecast and review of the past year of the FAA's research and development efforts.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 includes a provision for GAO to review the FAA's use of funding for safety R&D projects. This report examines how FAA identifies and reports on its allocation of funding for safety-related R&D. GAO reviewed FAA documents and data on R&D programs and enacted funding from FY 2019 through FY 2024 to understand the FAA's goals, funding allocations, and types of R&D projects. GAO compared the FAA's process and reporting practices with leading practices for R&D and components of federal standards for internal controls. Also, GAO interviewed FAA staff about their process to identify safety projects and reporting practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making one recommendation to FAA to report annually on the percentage of its appropriated funds, including the programs and funding amounts, that are used for safety R&D projects. The Department of Transportation concurred with the recommendation.

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AVIATION RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

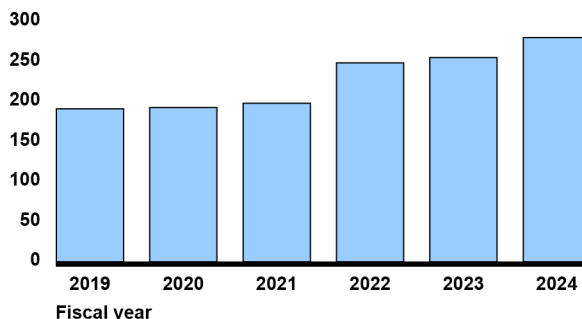
FAA Could Improve Its Reporting on Safety Programs

What GAO Found

From fiscal years (FY) 2019 through FY 2024, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) received over \$1.3 billion in appropriations for the Research, Engineering, and Development (RE&D) budgetary account (see fig.). The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 established a requirement that at least 70 percent of the appropriations from this account be for safety research and development (R&D) projects. During FY 2019 through 2024, FAA officials said they used subject matter expertise and professional judgment to determine that most of the funding from the RE&D budgetary account was used for safety R&D projects. In FY 2024, for example, FAA officials determined all funding for 22 of 24 programs funded by the RE&D account supported safety R&D projects. Of the two remaining programs, officials said 25 percent of funding for one of these programs also supported safety R&D projects. Using the programs and process identified by FAA, more than 70 percent of the RE&D budgetary account was allocated for safety R&D projects from FY 2019 through FY 2024.

Total Federal Aviation Administration Funding for the Research, Engineering, and Development Budgetary Account, Fiscal Years 2019-2024

Dollars (in millions)



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Aviation Administration data. | GAO-25-107697

From FY 2019 through FY 2024, FAA had not documented its process or criteria for identifying safety R&D projects. While FAA has internal guidance that describes its R&D development process, this guidance did not define what constitutes a safety R&D project. In February 2025, FAA updated its guidance to describe its new process and define the criteria it will use moving forward to identify safety R&D projects to meet the statutory requirement. The updated guidance will be used for the FAA's R&D planning for FY 2027 that will begin in the fall of 2025.

The FAA's annual reports do not include key information to support Congress's oversight of safety R&D funding. According to FAA officials, FAA reports to Congress upon request on whether it is meeting the statutory requirement for funding safety R&D but does not report this information regularly or publicly as part of its annual reports. Without such reporting, Congress and the public are unable to determine whether FAA is complying with the statutory requirement for funding safety R&D projects. As FAA is taking steps to document its new process and criteria for selecting safety R&D projects, reporting on the results of this process would further increase transparency on its spending and whether the agency is meeting its statutory requirement in support of its safety goals.