



Highlights of [GAO-10-729](#), a report to the Committee on Science and Technology, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Airports are a vital part of the nation's air transportation system and face many similar challenges. In 2003, the Airport Cooperative Research Program (ACRP) was authorized to conduct applied research to help airport operators solve shared challenges that are not addressed by other federal research. As requested, this report addresses (1) the extent to which ACRP's processes reflect criteria for conducting a high-quality research program and (2) ACRP's results to date and their usefulness for the aviation community. GAO reviewed ACRP documentation and compared ACRP processes to criteria previously developed by GAO that can be applied to research programs. These criteria identify three phases of the applied research process and steps to help produce high-quality results. GAO also reviewed ACRP projects and publications and interviewed ACRP stakeholders and airport officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Transportation (1) ensure ACRP documentation reflects all participants and governance practices and (2) clarify ACRP's role in conducting security research. The Department of Transportation generally agreed with the report, provided technical comments, and is considering the recommendations. The Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Research Board did not provide any comments on the draft report.

View [GAO-10-729](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Susan A. Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

AVIATION RESEARCH

Airport Cooperative Research Program Addresses Many Needs but Could Enhance Transparency and Clarify Scope of Research Role

What GAO Found

In each of the three phases of applied research that GAO has identified, ACRP conducts its research with processes that align with many of GAO's criteria for producing high-quality research, but some gaps exist.

- **Selecting projects:** ACRP has established a governing board, the ACRP Oversight Committee (AOC), which is composed of airport executives and other key industry stakeholders, and processes to determine the research needs of users and to select specific projects for funding. However, one organization that participates on the board—the Airport Consultants Council—and the consensus approach used to make project selection decisions are not included in the program's documented operating procedures. ACRP stakeholders commended the council's participation and the consensus approach, but their omission from documentation potentially diminishes program transparency.
- **Implementing projects:** ACRP's processes for establishing a project panel to manage research projects, selecting a researcher, and overseeing projects are well documented and include quality control steps. However, product dissemination efforts may miss some potential users, particularly staff at smaller airports and mid-level staff. The AOC has initiated a project to improve research dissemination to better serve these groups, although the project's scope and time frame is still being determined.
- **Evaluating projects and the program overall:** ACRP maintains considerable information on ongoing and completed projects that are used by program managers and the AOC to review project progress. The program, however, does not currently have a systematic process for evaluating the impact of individual projects or implementing continuous improvements to the program's overall performance. Two initiatives—the dissemination project and a project initiated to review ACRP processes—could address current gaps in project and program evaluation, though the scope and time frames of these projects are still being determined.

Through 2009, ACRP approved 169 projects, about half of which have been completed, and published 66 products on topics such as environmental impacts, policy and planning, and administration. Airport operators and other ACRP stakeholders consistently told GAO that the program provides the industry with useful and unique research that individual airports, particularly smaller airports, have neither the time nor budget to conduct. However, ACRP's role in conducting security research is unclear. ACRP materials, such as its annual solicitation of project ideas, include security as a potential topic within the scope of the program. However, the AOC has not recently funded security projects, in part because of differing views about whether ACRP should do this research. The Federal Aviation Administration, as a member of the AOC, indicated that the Department of Homeland Security is a better venue for such research. Conversely, other AOC members told GAO that ACRP could address some unmet security research needs. The AOC has the authority to determine what role, if any, is appropriate for ACRP in this area. By not doing so, over time, user satisfaction with the program could decline.