FAA Modernization and Ground Stop Oversight Brief

For state and county representatives and congressional staff

Public record reviewed through 14 November 2026 at 6:15 a.m. EST / 12:15 p.m. CET
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Executive summary

What is documented. On November 13, 2026, the FAA ordered departures stopped nationwide and later cancelled the restriction. The operational notices establish those actions and their recorded times. [16] [17]

What officials said. Secretary Sean Duffy attributed the disruption to overloaded legacy equipment, said new IP equipment was unaffected and excluded SMART. He also said radar and communications were not completely lost and existing procedures enabled safe landings. These remain attributed explanations and accounts of the response. [18]

Why the wider history matters. GAO documented aging-system risks in 2024, before the May 2025 modernization plan. Its 2026 review acknowledged initial progress while identifying cost and schedule gaps; DOT disputed aspects of that assessment. This history informs modernization oversight without establishing what caused the November 13 incident. [28] [2] [6]

What remains open. No final FAA technical root-cause report was located in the official releases reviewed by the stated cutoff. The brief therefore makes no finding about cause, fault or misconduct. Announcement timing and missing public documents do not establish a causal link or prove that safeguards were absent.

How to use this brief. Eleven recommended questions identify who can answer, why the question matters and which records could resolve it. Incident causation, modernization readiness and local impacts are treated as distinct oversight tasks. The goal is a documented explanation that can be checked and updated.

Purpose and scope: this brief separates two oversight tasks: establishing what caused the November 13 disruption, and assessing modernization delivery and safeguards. The chronology does not presume a connection between SMART and the incident. It recommends questions for documented answers and makes no finding about cause, fault or misconduct.

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Chronology before the SMART launch

Date or time	Documented public record
9 Nov 2023	Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) presentation: reported a March 27 FENS telecommunications contract award to Verizon and an initial testing and transition phase. This establishes a modernization predecessor, not completion. [1]
23 Sep 2024	GAO reported that FAA's 2023 assessment classified 51 of 138 air traffic control systems as unsustainable and 54 as potentially unsustainable. GAO found slow modernization of critical systems. These historical findings establish earlier risks, not the cause of the 2026 incident. [28]
8 May 2025	Secretary Sean Duffy and the Department of Transportation (DOT): announced a broad air traffic control replacement plan and projected greater safety, fewer outages and fewer delays. [2]
4 Dec 2025	Duffy and FAA Administrator Bryan Bedford: selected Peraton as prime integrator, announced an end-2028 objective and described $12.5 billion as a down payment requiring additional funding. [3]
22 May 2026	DOT: launched the Modern Skies website, with a commitment to monthly progress updates and local information on completed and upcoming projects. [4]
22 Jun 2026	FAA: announced Air Space Intelligence (ASI) work on Flow Management Data and Services (FMDS) and Strategic Management of Airspace, Routes, and Trajectories (SMART). Initial software operations were planned for fall; reduced congestion and workload were projected. [5]
14 Sep 2026	GAO acknowledged initial modernization progress and the urgency of replacing aging systems, while finding incomplete lifecycle cost estimates and no integrated Phase 1 schedule. DOT partially concurred, stating that program cost estimates and schedules existed. GAO maintained its recommendations because the materials omitted costs and did not integrate project dependencies. Phase 1 targeted December 2028; Phase 2 had no estimated start or completion. [6]

The GAO and DOT disagreement

DOT's response said teams had developed and continued updating Phase 1 lifecycle cost estimates and that program schedules existed. GAO found that the supplied estimates omitted government costs, much of later operations and maintenance, and Phase 2; it also found that separate project schedules did not incorporate their interdependencies. GAO retained both recommendations. This disagreement concerns the completeness and integration of planning, not whether any planning existed. [6]

Dates above are public release or presentation dates. Most sources supply no verified publication clock. The contract date within the first row is explicitly retrospective.

Evidence rule: an announcement establishes what was publicly stated. Deployment counts, technical explanations and projected benefits remain attributed to their source. An oversight request establishes that questions were asked, not that an allegation was proved. Each numbered citation links directly to a source.

Chronology of launch scrutiny and expansion

Date or time	Documented public record
15 Sep 2026	Bedford testimony: described intended links among connectivity, data, planning and future automation upgrades. These were architectural objectives, not a verified inventory of live production connections. [7]
21 Sep 2026	FAA launch release: announced limited SMART use around Washington, D.C.; projected fewer delays, lower fares and reduced controller stress. It said staff review recommendations and local leaders may accept or reject them. [8]
September launch materials	DOT fact sheet: described a slow, staged rollout with continuing testing, training and assessment as additional functions were introduced. No separate publication day was verified. [9]
28 Sep 2026	Duffy, Bedford and Senator Eric Schmitt: supported proposed additional modernization funding. DOT linked future completion to reduced disruption. The announcement was a funding appeal, not certification of a completed system. [10]
9 Oct 2026	Senator Chris Van Hollen, Representative April McClain Delaney and fellow Democratic signatories: requested a pause and answers about approvals, testing, training and oversight. Their letter described a 90-day evaluation before broader deployment and requested answers by October 19. This was the signatories' request, not a finding or action by Congress as a whole. [11]
13 Oct 2026	House Transportation and Infrastructure Democrats: requested a GAO audit of SMART/FMDS safety analysis, testing, performance measures and deployment strategy. This was a request, not an audit finding. [12]
5 Nov 2026	DOT: announced E-IDS information displays at five initial facilities, with 435 sites targeted by end-2028. It separately reported 69% copper replacement and 226 IP voice switches. These are agency-reported component measures. [13]
10 Nov 2026	FAA: announced SMART expansion to the airspace of all 22 centers after describing the regional rollout as successful. It reported 180 rerouted flights and average time and fuel savings. Exact activation times were not supplied. [14]

Analysis of the evaluation timetable

Analysis: September 21 to November 10 is 50 elapsed days. The source for a 90-day evaluation is the October 9 letter from Democratic lawmakers. These records alone do not establish an FAA deadline, a violated requirement or the release of every SMART capability. Question 4 requests the approved plan, any revisions and the expansion decision. [8] [11] [14]

The November 10 announcement preceded the November 13 incident by three calendar days. That sequence does not establish a causal relationship. Modernization oversight remains a separate line of inquiry unless incident evidence establishes a connection.

Chronology of the November 13 incident

All times below are EST, UTC minus 5 hours. Event time, notice issue time and the time a statement was made are kept separate. Briefing clock estimates use its observed 8:31 p.m. start; transcript offsets identify the relevant passage. [21]

Date or time	Documented public record
3:10 p.m. event 3:28 p.m. issue	FAA Advisory 107: O'Hare ground-stop period cites equipment outage and communications issues. Whether it shared the national incident's cause is not established here. [15]
3:53 p.m. event 3:54 p.m. issue	FAA Advisory 111: orders departures stopped until further notice; inbound international flights handled individually. [16]
8:16 p.m. event 8:19 p.m. issue	FAA Advisory 005: cancels the national stop. Duffy later reported reopening at 8:15 p.m.; the notice records a different event time and issue time. [17] [18]
About 8:34 p.m. 02:59-03:58 offset	Duffy: retrospectively placed broader radar and communications instability at 3:36 p.m. He said communications and radar were not completely lost and existing procedures enabled aircraft to land safely. These are attributed statements about the response, not an independent safety finding. [18] [19]
About 8:35-8:36 p.m. 04:28-05:43	Duffy: attributed inconsistent data to overloaded legacy switches/routers and said new IP switches were unaffected. These were official explanations, not a published final causal analysis. [18] [19]
About 8:45 p.m. 14:19-14:49	Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin: tentatively suggested patches and new technology had overwhelmed older systems. [19] [20]
About 8:54-8:55 p.m. 23:21-24:01	Duffy: asked about patching, restated legacy overload and unaffected IP equipment without clearly identifying an initiating change. [19] [20]
About 9:01-9:03 p.m. 30:28-32:05	Duffy: said detailed cause remained under investigation, then excluded SMART, describing it as disconnected from STARS/ERAM and supplying human-reviewed recommendations. [18] [19]

Other dated records: the FAA's November 13 newsroom statement labels its information preliminary. House committee Chair Sam Graves, a Republican, and Ranking Member Rick Larsen, a Democrat, jointly thanked FAA personnel and controllers for swift safety action and committed to reviewing the incident. The statement's exact publication clock is unavailable. [14] [22]

As of the review cutoff: no final FAA technical root-cause report was located in the official releases reviewed. Missing public records are not treated as proof that testing, approvals or agency replies did not exist. Service restoration does not itself establish the cause.

Questions on incident causation

Recommended oversight questions. Each asks for a documented answer without presuming cause, fault or a missing safeguard.

1 Establish the initiating event

Ask: What is the earliest verified fault, which facilities and functions were affected, and what evidence identifies the initiating event? How do the Chicago notice and the later 3:36 p.m. account relate, if at all?

Basis and purpose: The Chicago notice records a local restriction, while Duffy described broader instability at 3:36 p.m. Their relationship is unestablished; different event scopes and time fields should not be treated as a contradiction. [15] [18] A common timeline should distinguish detection, degradation and decisions to stop departures.

Respondent: FAA incident lead. Records: Timestamped incident log, affected-facility list and causal report with unresolved hypotheses.

2 Identify relevant changes without presuming a trigger

Ask: Which software, configuration or network changes, if any, were made to affected systems before the first fault? What did Secretary Mullin mean by patches and new technology, and has that account been confirmed, revised or rejected?

Basis and purpose: Mullin offered a tentative transition explanation (transcript offset 14:19-14:49). [19] Age and overload do not identify what initiated the failure.

Respondent: FAA technical lead and responsible providers through FAA. Records: Change register, approval records, versions, rollback actions and supporting telemetry.

3 Identify affected and excluded systems

Ask: Which systems contributed to the incident, which were ruled out, and what evidence supports those conclusions? What evidence supports the stated exclusion of SMART, including any relevant interfaces or shared infrastructure?

Basis and purpose: Duffy excluded SMART, citing separation and human review. [18] [19] The same evidentiary standard should support both causal findings and exclusions. This question seeks the technical record; it does not imply SMART contributed.

Respondent: FAA architecture and incident leads. Records: Public architecture summary and interface inventory; supporting logs through appropriate oversight channels.

Questions on evaluation and readiness

4 Reconcile the evaluation and expansion timetable

Ask: What evaluation period and success criteria did FAA approve? How does the 90-day period described in the congressional letter relate to the November 10 expansion? Identify the approving official and any revised scope, schedule or authorization.

Basis and purpose: The limited launch and expansion announcements were 50 days apart. [8] [11] [14] This establishes which decision was made and whether it met the applicable criteria, without presuming a breach.

Respondent: FAA official responsible for operational acceptance. Records: Approved plan, evaluation results, decision memorandum and revision history.

5 Verify readiness for the transition

Ask: Which compatibility, load, backup and rollback tests, if any, evaluated the mix of old and new components? What passed, what limitations remained, and who accepted them? Separately, what tests supported lifting the ground stop?

Basis and purpose: DOT described staged rollout; the briefing distinguished old and new equipment. [9] [18] Deployment acceptance and recovery acceptance answer different readiness questions.

Respondent: FAA safety and operational acceptance officials. Records: Test plans, pass criteria, results, risk acceptances and signed release decisions.

6 Make human oversight measurable

Ask: Which staff were trained before each rollout stage? How were recommendations and any rejections, overrides or inaccuracies recorded? What evidence assesses workload, decision quality and safety alongside delay or fuel benefits?

Basis and purpose: FAA said staff review SMART recommendations; the October 9 signatories requested training and evaluation details. [8] [11] Operational records can show how that human role works in practice.

Respondent: FAA operational lead, with controller and workforce input. Records: Training completion data, procedures, aggregate recommendation logs and evaluation measures.

Questions on safeguards delivery and accountability

7 Define what completion and funding will deliver

Ask: Which capabilities, sites and dependencies are included in each funded phase and deadline? What remains unfunded? What has changed in the integrated schedule and lifecycle cost estimate since GAO's review?

Basis and purpose: GAO identified cost coverage and schedule integration gaps; DOT said program estimates and schedules existed. [6] The later funding request raises a separate question about funded deliverables and dependencies. [10] Neither establishes the outage's cause.

Respondent: FAA program and financial leads; DOT. Records: Current baseline, cost assumptions, dependencies, change history and response to GAO recommendations.

8 Close the public accountability loop

Ask: What responses were provided to the October requests, on what dates, and which can be released? Who owns the incident review, when will findings be issued, and how will provisional statements be corrected if evidence changes?

Basis and purpose: The lawmakers who signed the October letters requested records and review. [11] [12] Graves and Larsen later committed to reviewing the incident. [22] These requests do not establish that agency replies were absent or that a failure occurred.

Respondent: FAA/DOT legislative affairs and the identified review lead. Records: Response correspondence, review scope, publication milestones and corrective-action register.

What constitutes a substantive answer

Request the finding, supporting record and date; the responsible official; remaining uncertainty; and the next verification step. If evidence cannot be released publicly, request a public summary and a route for authorized oversight review. A project count, funding total or general safety assurance does not answer a question about a particular approval or technical cause.

Roles for state and county offices

State and county offices can request FAA briefings and work with their congressional delegation on federal oversight. Federal airspace management belongs to the FAA; local offices should not assume authority to direct federal air traffic operations. FAA Regional Administrators coordinate with state and local governments. [23] [24]

Questions state and county offices can pursue locally

Confirm each airport's owner/operator and the office's actual oversight role. Airport-owner obligations vary; the questions below are recommended requests, not claims of universal county authority. Coordinate federal technical questions through the FAA Regional Administrator and congressional delegation. [24] [25]

9 Document the local effects

Ask: How many local flights, passengers and essential movements were affected, over what period? What public costs or service interruptions can be documented, and what remains estimated?

Basis and purpose: The federal departure restriction was national. [16] National disruption figures do not establish the effects or costs in a particular county.

Respondent: Airport operator, airlines and relevant local agencies. Records: Time-bounded counts, definitions, service logs and itemized public costs, with duplicates removed.

10 Review passenger support and emergency coordination

Ask: Who coordinated airport, airline, emergency-management and ground-transport responses? What arrangements covered accessible communications, mobility assistance, medication needs and overnight accommodation, and what gaps, if any, were recorded?

Basis and purpose: FAA's overnight plan kept coordination lines open and noted separate airline-requested stops. [27] Canceling the national order does not establish that local services or passenger needs had returned to normal.

Respondent: Airport operator, emergency management, airlines and transport providers. Records: Activation timeline, assistance logs, after-action findings and assigned improvements.

11 Verify the local modernization picture

Ask: Which upgrades serving our airports are planned, installed, tested and accepted for operational use? Which dependencies sit outside the county, and how are local officials notified of outages and scheduled changes?

Basis and purpose: DOT committed to providing local project reporting and published national component counts. [4] [13] A national percentage cannot establish the readiness or resilience of a particular airport.

Respondent: FAA regional/program officials and airport operator. Records: Site-level status, acceptance dates, external dependencies, planned outages and contact procedures.

Recommended next steps

Request one coordinated briefing with named technical and operational respondents. Send the numbered questions in advance and request a record-based written response. Ask the congressional delegation to coordinate existing committee, GAO and DOT Inspector General work; the Inspector General accepts congressional audit requests. [26]

Set an explicit response date agreed with the recipients, identify an office contact and maintain a public tracker of requests, answers and outstanding records. Preserve local incident records and copies of source statements. Publish corrections with dates and source links. These are recommended practices, not asserted statutory deadlines.

Source register for modernization

Numbered citations and source titles link directly to the records. Dates below refer to the cited release or entry.

[1] FAA FENS program status

9 Nov 2023 workshop, slide 69; reports the 27 Mar 2023 Verizon award and planned testing.

[2] DOT modernization plan announcement

8 May 2025; proposed program scope and public benefits.

[3] DOT Peraton prime integrator announcement

4 Dec 2025; end-2028 objective, existing funding and additional funding request.

[4] DOT Modern Skies public progress website

22 May 2026; monthly reporting and local project information commitment.

[5] FAA ASI contract announcement for FMDS and SMART

22 Jun 2026; planned capabilities and initial fall operations.

[6] GAO modernization audit and DOT response

GAO-26-107992, released 14 Sep 2026. Planning findings and agency response: printed pages 23–29; DOT response dated 12 Aug 2026 in Appendix III.

[7] Bedford prepared House appropriations testimony

15 Sep 2026; intended relationship among connectivity, data, planning and automation upgrades.

[8] FAA SMART limited operations launch

21 Sep 2026; Washington-region launch, projected benefits and human review.

[9] DOT SMART launch fact sheet

September launch materials; staged rollout, continuing testing and training. Separate issue day unverified.

[10] DOT Modern Skies Act announcement

28 Sep 2026; funding proposal and projected benefits conditional on future completion.

[11] Van Hollen congressional pause request and full letter

9 Oct 2026; Democratic signatories describe a 90-day evaluation and request answers by 19 Oct. This is not a finding by Congress as a whole.

[12] House T and I Democrats request GAO audit

13 Oct 2026, dated in committee release index; request concerns SMART and FMDS.

[13] DOT E-IDS deployments and progress figures

5 Nov 2026; first five facilities, 435-site target and agency-reported replacement figures.

[14] FAA general statements on SMART and the outage

10 Nov expansion entry and 13 Nov preliminary outage entry. Rolling page; use the individual entry dates.

Source register for the incident and historical context

Numbered citations and source titles link directly to the records. Dates below refer to the cited release or entry.

[15] FAA Advisory 107 for Chicago O'Hare

13 Nov: ground-stop period begins 20:10Z; signed 20:28Z. These are different time fields.

[16] FAA Advisory 111 national ground stop

13 Nov: event 20:53Z; issue/effective time 20:54Z. Departures stopped until further notice.

[17] FAA Advisory 005 national ground stop cancellation

14 Nov UTC: event 01:16Z; signed/effective 01:19Z. Both fall on 13 Nov in EST.

[18] DOT official briefing account

13 Nov; Duffy's account of the response, legacy overload, new equipment, reopening and SMART. Includes recording link.

[19] Factbase joint briefing transcript

13 Nov. Secondary transcript; elapsed offsets cited in chronology. Original White House recording: source 20.

[20] White House official briefing recording

13 Nov; linked by DOT. Player has lead-in, so transcript offsets are not player timestamps.

[21] Contemporaneous White House pool timing report

Reporter Naomi Lim: briefing ran 8:31-9:04 p.m. EST; note sent 9:06 p.m. Independent archive.

[22] Graves and Larsen joint oversight statement

13 Nov; bipartisan committee leaders thank FAA and controllers for the safety response and commit to review. Publication clock unavailable.

[23] United States Code on airspace authority

49 U.S.C. 40103(a)-(b); federal airspace sovereignty and FAA airspace responsibilities.

[24] FAA regional engagement and coordination

See Regional Administrators and Ombudsman: coordination with federal, state and local governments.

[25] FAA airport owner and sponsor obligations

Airport Compliance Program overview; obligations vary by agreements and conveyance documents.

[26] DOT Inspector General audit process

Explains audit initiation, including congressional requests, evidence review and agency responses.

[27] FAA overnight operations plan

14 Nov UTC; describes overnight coordination and separate airline-requested ground stops.

[28] GAO review of aging air traffic control systems

GAO-24-107001, published 23 Sep 2024; historical findings based on FAA's 2023 sustainability assessment. Current recommendation statuses on the web page may change.

Method and edition record

Method: selected substantive public records from the modernization and incident timelines, with duplicate releases consolidated. The same evidentiary standard applies to every administration, official and party. Relevant agency responses, historical context and contrary evidence are included; attributed statements, analysis and recommendations are distinguished from findings. No anonymous-source causal account is presented as established. This dated snapshot is not a forensic investigation or an exhaustive catalogue of public statements.

Edition 2 • Editorial revision 14 November 2026. Added the 2024 GAO context, fuller agency and committee responses, precise oversight attribution, broader system questions and an executive summary. The incident review cutoff is unchanged.