Problems plague new air traffic control computers

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(AP) -- New computers crucial to modernizing the U.S. air traffic control system have run into serious problems and may not be fully operational by the end of this year when the current system is supposed to be replaced, a government watchdog said Wednesday.

The $2.1 billion computer system has misidentified aircraft and had trouble processing radar information, Calvin Scovel, the Transportation Department's inspector general, told a House panel. Air traffic controllers at a Federal Aviation Administration radar center in Salt Lake City, where the new computers are being tested, also have had difficulty transferring responsibility for planes to other controllers, he said.

Scovel warned that if the problems continue they could delay the FAA's NextGen program to replace the current air traffic control system, which is based on World War II-era radar technology, with a new system that's based on GPS technology.

The troubled computer system, called En Route Automation Modernization, is designed to handle aircraft flying at higher altitudes between airports, rather than planes taking off or landing. While not specifically part of the NextGen program, it is a critical underpinning.

The FAA had planned to have ERAM operational in Salt Lake City by December 2009 and at the agency's 20 other radar centers that handle en route traffic by the end of this year. That's when the FAA's contract with

IBM to maintain the present computer system expires. The present system relies on a unique computer language called Jovial that is understood by a dwindling number of technicians.

However, deployment of the system in Salt Lake City has been delayed six months, and it is unlikely that the FAA will be able to have ERAM fully working in the 20 other radar centers by the end of this year. The FAA is spending $14 million a month trying to resolve the problems and get the system working, Scovel told the House Transportation and Infrastructure aviation subcommittee.

"FAA officials are concerned about the ERAM transition at larger, more complex (radar centers) like Chicago and New York," he said. Those centers have unique air traffic control demands that will require adaptations to the ERAM software, Scovel said.

FAA spokeswoman Laura Brown said the agency is working to resolve the problems at the Salt Lake City center.

"We want to make sure the system is operating smoothly before we expand ERAM to other sites," Brown said. "We do not expect the minor delays in ERAM to slow down the transition to NextGen."

Scovel also said problems with a new FAA telecommunications systems raise questions about whether it can be relied upon for NextGen.

A failure of the system in November delayed more than 800 flights nationwide, and it took the FAA and its contractor over five hours to restore service, he said. The FAA has established review teams to assess the overall system design, he said.

Another witness at the hearing complained that a federal environmental law could delay the start of a key portion of NextGen even though the

new air traffic system is projected to significantly save fuel and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by allowing planes to fly faster, more direct routes.

Changing flight path designs will require environmental impact statements that could take years to complete and add millions of dollars to the cost of NextGen, said Lorraine Bolsinger, president and CEO of General Electric Aviation Systems, a key contractor.

On the Net:

DOT Inspector General http://www.oig.dot.gov

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee http://transportation.house.gov

Federal Aviation Administration http://www.faa.gov