



Center for  
Transportation  
Policy



January 2026

# Stabilizing the Skies: Lessons from the Longest Government Shutdown in U.S. History

How Flight Cuts and Policy Missteps  
Disrupted America's Aviation System

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# How the FAA Navigated the Federal Shutdown

Last year's 43-day government shutdown, which began on October 1, 2025 and ended on November 12, 2025, placed unprecedented strain on federal operations. Nowhere was this more visible than at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), where thousands of air traffic controllers worked without pay and staffing numbers fell to low levels. In an effort to preserve safety, the FAA made the difficult decision to reduce flights at 40 of the nation's major airports.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, this approach proved overly broad. Uniform cuts were applied regardless of each airport's staffing levels, operational complexity, or congestion patterns. A more targeted strategy would have minimized disruption while still protecting the integrity of the National Airspace System.

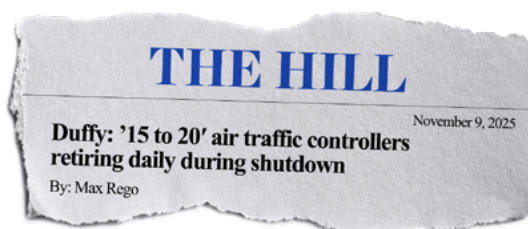
This report from the Center for Transportation Policy (CTP) examines the economic impact of the shutdown, identifies strategic missteps, and outlines actions Congress can take to prevent similar aviation disruptions during future funding lapses.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT

# The Cost of Government-Mandated Flight Reductions

As the federal shutdown dragged on, the FAA faced mounting operational issues. The nation's air traffic controller workforce—already strained prior to the shutdown—[missed](#) two full paychecks and received only a partial third. Some controllers [sought](#) second jobs to support their families, while others [left](#) the profession entirely. Many simply called out.

***Fast Fact: More than 6 million passengers were impacted by government shutdown-related flight cancellations or delays.***

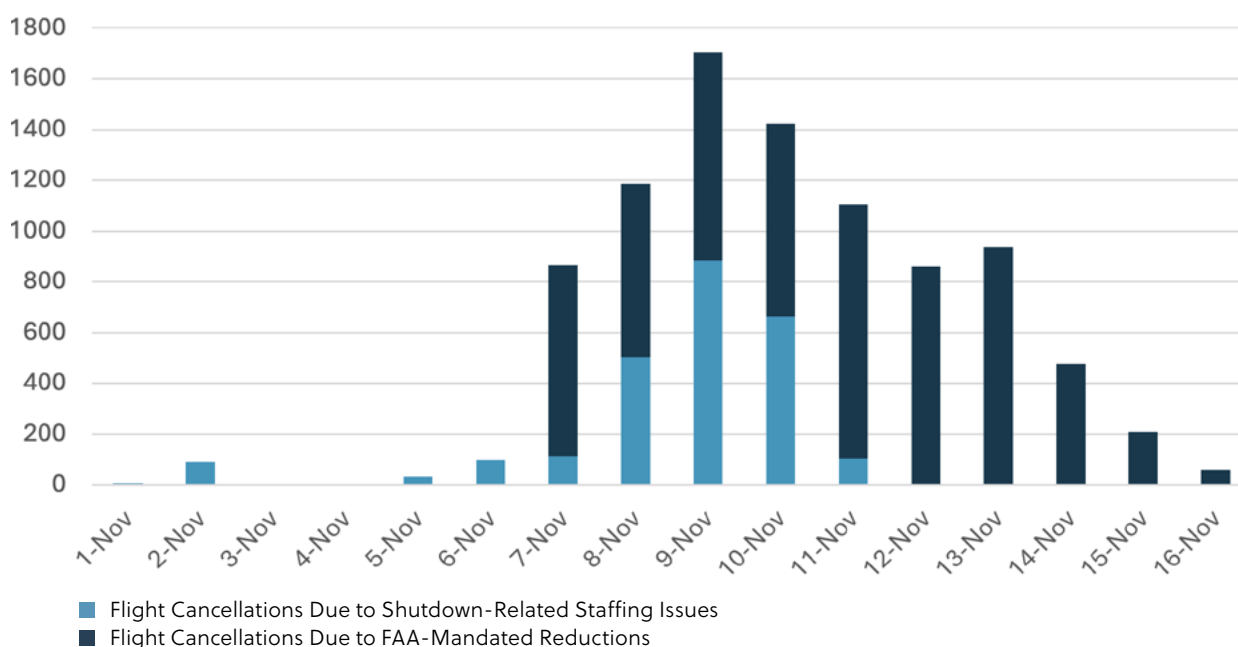




The shutdown also handicapped efforts to train and recruit more air traffic controllers, which will have negative ripple effects well into the future. During a December hearing on Capitol Hill, FAA Administrator Bedford [noted](#) that we lost 400 to 500 air traffic controller trainees, who “just sort of gave up during the lapse.”

Given this environment, delays and cancellations began to rise.

### FLIGHT CANCELLATIONS ATTRIBUTABLE TO STAFFING OR GOVERNMENT MANDATES



### CANCELLATION TOTALS

Date	Shutdown-Related Staffing Issues	Mandated Reductions	Total
October	188	N/A	188
Nov 1-6	229	N/A	229
Nov 7-16	2,269	6,559	8,828
Cumulative	2,686	6,559	9,245

To stabilize the airspace system, the FAA [proposed](#) a 10 percent reduction in flights at 40 U.S. airports. Although the 10 percent cut was not fully realized because policymakers came to a deal on Capitol Hill to end the shutdown, the directive still resulted in significant FAA-mandated pruning, triggering thousands of flight cancellations and inflicting substantial economic harm.



A CTP analysis finds that from the start of the FAA-ordered reductions on November 7, 2025, through their suspension on November 16, 2025, more than 6,500 flights were eliminated across the 40 impacted airports. When cancellations related to staffing shortages throughout the duration of the shutdown are included, the total number of flights lost climbs to more than 9,000.



**ECONOMIC IMPACT OF  
GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN:**

Type	Cost
Direct Cost to Industry	\$1.931 Billion
Domestic Travel/ Tourism Spend	\$1.755 Billion
Indirect/Induced Economic Impact	\$3.252 Billion
Forgone State/ Local Tax Revenue	\$133 Million
Passenger Value of Time	\$183 Million
TOTAL ECONOMIC IMPACT	\$7.25 Billion

The economic consequences were significant. The air traffic cuts cascaded across airlines, airport vendors, business travelers, tourism economies, and supply chains. In total, between October 1, 2025, and November 16, 2025, the shutdown and resulting flight cuts imposed an estimated \$7.25 billion burden on the U.S. economy. That’s more than \$150 million per day. Another analysis from the U.S. Travel Association calculates \$6 billion in lost travel spending.

The ordeal also shook consumer confidence and the lingering unease will likely influence future travel plans—persuading some to use alternative forms of transportation or stay home. That will mean a further loss of economic activity down the road.



## MISSTEPS AND LESSONS LEARNED

# Rethinking FAA Strategies for Future Crises

The FAA's proposal to cut one-tenth of flights at those 40 airports was well-intentioned. With controllers unpaid, staffing stretched thin, and no clarity from Congress on when funding would resume, the agency had to act quickly to preserve safety in the national airspace. It remains unclear, however, whether all of these cuts were needed.

With the benefit of hindsight, two lessons emerge.

First, selecting the 40 airports for reductions was quick, simple, and easy to communicate—but ultimately imprecise.

According to FAA [data](#) from April 2025, Detroit Metro (DTW) had more than 80 percent of its air traffic controller positions filled yet still faced mandated reductions. Meanwhile, Scranton/Wilkes-Barre (AVP) operated with only 46 percent staffing but did not. Similar discrepancies appeared nationwide. Denver's tower was staffed at over four-fifths of target levels but received cuts, while Roanoke Airport (ROA) in Virginia operated with just 62 percent of its needed controllers and avoided reductions entirely.

A data-driven approach that prioritizes staffing levels, traffic complexity, and airspace congestion would have resulted in far more balanced—and less economically damaging—adjustments.

A second lesson from the shutdown is the value of transparency and sharing information with the public in real time. Given the shutdown-created staffing chaos was not reflected in air traffic control data from earlier in 2025, the FAA should have made up-to-date staffing information available to support FAA policy decisions. Greater transparency could have improved coordination with airlines, strengthened public confidence, and enabled smoother contingency planning across the industry.

In short, during future government shutdowns, the FAA should use a scalpel rather than a hammer when determining where and how to adjust flight operations, and back up decisions with data that is made available to the public.

**Key Takeaway:**  
***Decision makers should use a more targeted approach while being more transparent with supporting data.***



## HOW CONGRESS CAN HELP

# Policy Solutions to Minimize Future Aviation Disruptions

Although the FAA can refine its approach and application, Congress ultimately plays the decisive role in preventing shutdown-related aviation crises. One of the most significant opportunities is the Aviation Funding Stability Act of 2025, [introduced](#) by Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS). The legislation would allow the FAA to temporarily draw from the Airport and Airway Trust Fund during a shutdown, ensuring that air traffic control staffing, training, and safety oversight continue uninterrupted regardless of budget negotiations in Washington.

Alternative proposals could reinforce this stability. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Sam Graves (R-MO) [introduced](#) legislation enabling the FAA to tap the Aviation Insurance Revolving Fund—a wartime insurance fund for airlines—during budget impasses. Whether through Moran’s bill, Graves’ bill, or a combination of approaches, the goal remains the same: ensuring the FAA can access alternative funding streams when Congress cannot reach an agreement.

Finally, Congress must continue to invest in long-term modernization efforts. While \$12.5 billion has been [released](#) to retire outdated technologies—from paper flight strips to floppy-disk-based software—an estimated \$19 billion in additional funding is still [needed](#) to complete the overhaul of America’s aviation infrastructure.

The Department of Transportation is already [replacing](#) decades-old radar systems, upgrading copper wiring to fiber optics, and introducing modern digital tools into control towers. Completing this modernization is essential not only to improving efficiency and safety but also to ensure the system remains resilient during turbulent periods.

With proactive steps from lawmakers, the nation’s aviation system can become stronger, more stable, and far less vulnerable to the disruptions caused by prolonged budget battles in Washington.

