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AOPA Urges Congress to Approve Additional ATC Modernization Funding

Pilots Need Clarity on VFR Operations During Ground Stops

WASHINGTON, November 17, 2026—The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) is urging Congress to approve additional funding for air traffic control modernization after last week's nationwide ground stop halted departures across the country for more than four hours.

The FAA issued the ground stop shortly before 4 p.m. EST on November 13 after a telecommunications failure affected many air traffic control facilities. The outage occurred amid the largest-ever overhaul of the nation's ATC system.

Congress provided the FAA with a $12.5 billion down payment in 2025 to start the modernization effort, but significantly more is needed to finish the job. In September, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy asked Congress for an additional $30 billion for the next phase. After the outage, Duffy upped his request, saying a complete overhaul would cost about $50 billion. He and FAA Administrator Bryan Bedford briefed lawmakers today and outlined how the money would be used.

"Last Friday showed what happens when the largest and most complex aviation system in the world continues to rely on decades-old technology," said AOPA Senior Vice President of Government Affairs and Advocacy Jim Coon. "Airlines and general aviation pilots both felt it. Transparency, funding, and leadership are the surest ways to keep this from happening again."

AOPA is one of more than 60 aviation organizations representing the entire industry that make up the Modern Skies Coalition. The coalition has continued to strongly support the ongoing modernization effort, instead of revisiting the long-running debate over privatizing the air traffic control system.

"Friday's meltdown underscores the importance of modernizing our air traffic control system," said AOPA Acting Co-President Katie Pribyl. "While some are unfortunately using this event to call for handing over our air traffic system to the airlines, the aviation industry is united in putting privatization behind us and focusing on modernizing our system. This unity is unprecedented, and AOPA is proud to help lead this coalition."

The outage also exposed a gap in how the FAA communicates with general aviation pilots during a nationwide ground stop. When the FAA stated that all airports were ground stopped, it did not specify whether VFR operations were included. With no clear direction from the FAA, pilots in different parts of the country got different answers—some VFR flights were allowed to continue, while other pilots were told to land.

"When the FAA stops the entire system, pilots shouldn't have to guess whether that includes them," said AOPA Vice President of Regulatory Affairs David Boulter. "No NOTAM was issued to make pilots aware. Pilots and controllers need clear guidance

about what types of operations are affected during a ground stop, and how that will be communicated to pilots who operate out of the thousands of nontowered fields across the country."