

How Bad Is It?

If most of your flying doesn't involve dealing with controllers on a daily basis, you might wonder what all the fuss is about. Too, the big Tracons aren't really where the major staffing problems are. But get off the beaten path to more rural towered airports, or spend most of your time in the flight levels, and you'll likely encounter facilities where trainees are the norm, even if they're backed up by a fully qualified controller. One result is an 81-percent increase in operational errors since 2007, according to reporting by the *Boston Globe*.

The newspaper says more than half of the 15,000 controllers working today have been hired in the last five years "as the FAA scrambles to replace a large pool of retiring controllers." That's putting a strain on the FAA's training resources, which were contracted out to Raytheon in 2008. Another problem? The FAA cut its ATC instructor staffing levels, according to the *Globe*, by 30 percent.

Will NextGen help? Maybe, but there's no free lunch. Critics point to the 2009 crash of Air France Flight 447, a highly automated Airbus A330, which literally fell out of the sky as its pilots struggled to make sense of its failed systems. A recent Associated Press report looked at Flight 447 and noted industry-wide criticism of increased automation in the cockpit, which is being blamed for loss of hand-flying skills.

But isn't the transition toward greater automation at ATC and in the cockpit good? "The change is motivated more by economics than by safety," former NTSB Chairman Jim Hall told the *Pittsburg Tribune-Review*. "Safety needs to be the primary driver."

Even with greater ATC automation, however, there still will be a need for experienced, well-trained controllers. According to the *Globe*, it used to take the FAA three to five years to turn out a fully trained controller. Now, it's being done in one-and-a-half to three years. The obvious conclusion? The average controller won't be as experienced as before, at least until the FAA can break the hiring/retiring cycle begun in 1981.

