

Congress to DOT Secretary

Where is GPS Backup Demo?

In a letter dated March 7, Congressman Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon) chided Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao for slow progress on a mandate for a GPS Backup Technology Demonstration and asked for a status update.



CONGRESSMAN DEFAZIO DESCRIBES A GPS BACKUP SYSTEM IN THE LETTER AS “... AN IMPORTANT MISSING PIECE OF OUR NATION’S CURRENT AND FUTURE INFRASTRUCTURE.”

“We are concerned that 14 months after the mandate ... became law, and 11 months after Congress provided substantial funds... the administration has made little observable progress,” DeFazio said.

As chairman of the powerful House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, DeFazio arguably has the most influence over the department of any member of the House of Representatives. The letter was co-signed by congressmen Rick Larsen (D-Washington), chair of the Aviation Subcommittee, Sean Patrick Maloney (R-New York), chair of the Coast Guard and Marine Transportation subcommittee, and John Garamendi (D-California), chair of the Armed Services Readiness subcommittee.

DeFazio also observed in the letter that the government first formally recognized the need for a GPS backup in 2001. On August 29 of that year the Volpe Transportation System Center issued its final report, “Vulnerability of the Transportation Infrastructure Relying on the Global Positioning System.” Soon after the report was released the Federal Aviation Administration abandoned its plan to have aviation in the U.S. rely entirely on space-based navigation.

Previously it had planned to save hundreds of millions of dollars by eliminating its network of terrestrial air navigation beacons. The Volpe study also led to a Presidential policy in 2004 requiring the Department of Transportation (DOT) to establish a GPS backup capability “...to meet growing national, homeland, and economic security requirements.” This policy, National Security Presidential Directive 39, was kept in place by the Obama and Trump administrations and remains in force today.


Citing the failure of the last two administrations to follow-through on commitments in 2008 and 2015 to back up GPS with an eLoran system, DeFazio’s letter said that Congress has taken the initiative. As one example, the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act required a GPS Backup Technology Demonstration by June of 2019. In 2018 Congress appropriated \$15M for the project.

Congressman DeFazio describes a GPS backup system in the letter as “...an important missing piece of our nation’s current and future infrastructure.” Referring to a GPS Backup as “missing infrastructure” could be an important signal. DeFazio has said that his focus for this Congress will be on infrastructure.

The letter also says that the technology demonstration should be a key component of the department filling its requirement under the National Timing Resilience and Security Act of 2018. This act mandates DOT establish a terrestrial timing backup for GPS by 2020.

Congressman DeFazio asked for a reply to his letter within two weeks. We understand that, as of March 25, none had been received.

The failure of the last two administrations to focus on their own mandates for a system to complement and backup GPS has been attributed by many to the lack of a champion within the executive branch. Leadership of PNT issues is the responsibility of a very senior committee, and, until now, no individual or department has been willing to step forward and direct the project.

This maybe changing. Congress’ increased focus, recent legislation, and funding to support this issue has gone a long way to raise visibility within the administration. Also, a new leader has been appointed to the DOT’s office responsible for PNT. Diana Furchtgott-Roth has recently arrived as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology (there is currently no serving Assistant Secretary). We understand that she understands the importance of this issue and has already been engaging with industry and other stakeholders. A very hopeful, optimistic start. 

A copy of the letter from DeFazio and the other three congressmen to Secretary of Transportation Chao is available at: https://rntfnd.org/wp-content/uploads/PNT-Ltr-to-Chao_3_7_2019.pdf



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