Huerta ends term heading FAA; Dan Elwell named acting administrator

Aaron Karp, ATWonline | JAN 8, 2018

FAA headquarters in Washington DC (Dan Hockensmith/Aviation Week)

Michael Huerta's (left) five-year term as FAA administrator ended Jan. 7 and deputy administrator Dan Elwell (below) has taken over as acting administrator.

US President Donald Trump has not yet nominated the next FAA administrator. It is uncertain whether Elwell could be a candidate. He does have one qualification Trump has indicated he wants at the top spot at FAA: Elwell is a former pilot. A graduate of the US Air Force Academy, Elwell flew Boeing 757s, 767s, DC-10s and MD-80s over a 16-year commercial pilot career with American Airlines.

Trump expressed dismay that Huerta was not a pilot and said it would be "better to have a pilot" leading FAA. Huerta was nominated to the post by former US President Barack Obama.

Huerta is widely credited within the air transport industry for gaining some traction in FAA's NextGen ATC program and for a strong focus on safety, particularly his effort to make FAA more predictive than reactive regarding safety.

The initiative to transition US ATC to a satellite-based system did make progress in several areas under Huerta, including the installation of Data Comm—enabling voiceless communication between pilots and controllers—at airports across the US. However, US air traffic

controllers continue to use paper flight strips[1] and airlines have complained NextGen has moved too slowly overall.[2] Huerta was generally reluctant to wade into the debate over whether ATC should be split off from FAA,[3] which proponents believe would speed up air traffic management modernization.

There were no fatal crashes involving US passenger airlines during Huerta's five-year tenure and the administrator placed a heavy emphasis on reforming FAA's safety oversight. Huerta championed an FAA rule requiring all US commercial airlines to establish a safety management system (SMS), which uses data analysis to identify safety risks, by 2018. He believed FAA was better off moving away from a punitive approach to safety.[4]

"We don't want operators who might inadvertently make a mistake to hide it because they have a fear of being punished," Huerta explained. "If there is a failing, whether human or mechanical, we need to know about it, to learn from it and make the changes necessary to prevent it from happening again."

Elwell takes over FAA on an acting basis as the agency faces a March 31 deadline to be reauthorized. Huerta repeatedly expressed frustration at the inconsistency with which FAA is funded by Congress, which has regularly passed temporary extensions rather than a full reauthorization. FAA is currently operating under a temporary extension.

"Dan's background as a military and commercial pilot and past leadership positions in FAA and the aviation sector ensures a seamless transition to continue the important mission of the FAA," US transportation secretary Elaine Chao said.

Elwell was FAA assistant administrator for policy, planning and environment from 2006 to 2008. He was Aerospace Industries Association (AIA) VP-civil aviation from 2008 to 2013 and Airlines for America (A4A) SVP-safety, security and operations from 2013 to 2015.

Carl Burleson, FAA deputy assistant administrator for policy, international and environment,[5] has been named acting deputy administrator under Elwell.

---

[1] aiR footnote: The key point that the author misses, and NATCA/FAA are careful to NEVER talk about, is that paper strips are a critical and redundant safety element, to guard against a total computer failure. They are not used for conducting ATC; rather, they are posted and remain available for use, while also providing ample job security to NATCA members.

[2] aiR footnote: Not true. In fact, most airlines are happy with the cover that NextGen has provided, enabling them to discard decades worth of noise mitigation strategies while pretending to help the environment. They are laughing all the way to the bank.

[3] aiR footnote: Karp is here (again!) engaging in pro-industry slant. Huerta (and other highest officials at FAA) has made it quite clear: he (and they) all favor NextGen and ATC privatization, both of which are seen to provide ample opportunities for self-enrichment, such as post-retirement consulting work.

[4] aiR footnote: Wow. Actually, these SMS programs are aimed at stopping the general public from seeing the errors by controllers, pilots, mechanics, et al. When FAA created the ATSAP SMS for air traffic controllers, it was essentially enticing them away from use of the excellent 'voluntary reporting' program used by NASA, known as ASRS. NASA has done an excellent job of 'sanitizing' these reports so that the general details are viewable by the general public; now, under ATSAP, all the details are permanently hidden. Transparency? Hell, no!

[5] aiR footnote: So, the guy in charge of FAA's CATEX abuses and wholesale abandonment of NEPA-related environmental diligence is being promoted?!?