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February 1, 2021 [8 Comments](#)



[Networking](#)

After 15 years, Cisco Wireless AireOS Controllers are going away

4 min read

[Byron Magrane](#)

Remember 2005? What were you doing then? Were you waiting a line for Microsoft's recently released Xbox 360? Were you cheering for Tim Duncan and the San Antonio Spurs as they closed out the Detroit Pistons for the NBA Championship? German Chancellor Angela Merkel assumed office as the first female Chancellor of Germany. Do you remember witnessing that?

It was a pretty busy year, but if you were in the tech world back then, I'm sure you noticed the new family of wireless LAN controllers from Cisco, specifically the Cisco 4404 Wireless Controllers. These new controllers made a huge impact on the industry as they offered support of 100 access points and less than 4Gbps of throughput. These numbers look very pedestrian now, the smallest controller in the Catalyst family, the 9800-L, supports up to 500 access points and 10Gbps. But back in the early part of the century, this was something that not many had seen before.

During those years Cisco, and in particular the products that used the AireOS, lead the industry with a bevy of Wi-Fi innovations. From Radio Resource Management, providing for the first system-wide view of the RF network, to [Cisco CleanAir](#), which detects and mitigates interference in the early part of the 2010s, AireOS products helped to make sure that Wi-Fi devices were able to send and receive packets reliably and cleanly. In the middle part of the decade, AireOS products saw the introduction of [Application Visibility and Control](#), Hyperlocation and [Flexible Radio Assignments](#) (FRA). All of these innovations took what was developed years earlier and improved the network. Automatically need extra bandwidth for an influx of devices? FRA can help. In the middle part of the decade, AireOS was there stretching the definition of what the wireless network means with new solutions such as [Cisco Software-Defined Access](#) and Cisco Intelligent Capture. Suddenly, segmentation and real-time telemetry are something that are a real-time thing.

Cisco AireOS controllers have served us well through many iterations of the Wi-Fi standard, from the early days of 802.11n, to 802.11ac waves 1 and 2 and now with 802.11ax or Wi-Fi 6 Cisco. But with the latest standard in place and the Cisco Catalyst Controllers paving the way, Cisco recently announced that their Wireless AireOS Controllers have gone End-of-Life. I know that for the majority of you, the question that arise with this news is a simple word, "Why?" The reason because the AireOS controllers have matured over time and can now be replaced by functionally richer Catalyst technology controllers. Rest assured that the 15 years of wireless innovations and RF excellence are being brought over to the Catalyst 9800 series.

But what's next, where do AireOS customer go when they need to replace their controllers?

As the market adopt Public Cloud for scale and agility and Network as a Service becomes a reality, you will still need some wireless controller functions to be run on prem for the network to scale and have high performance. C9800 is the right platform for the job as fully programmable, scalable and can be deployed to serve different consumption models.

Read aloud

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Cisco leading the industry with Wi-Fi innovations

For every major change in WLAN over the last 20+ years



Whether your solution calls for Cisco 3504 Wireless Controller replacement, the Catalyst 9800-L, or the Cisco 8540 Wireless Controller upgrade the Catalyst 9800-80, or somewhere in between with the Catalyst 9800-40 (the step up from the Cisco 5520 Wireless Controller) these controllers pack a punch.

The Cisco Catalyst 9800 Series Wireless Controllers are the next generation of controllers that bridge the intent-based networking portfolio and offer deployment flexibility. Powered by [Cisco IOS XE](#), the Cisco Catalyst 9800 Series Wireless Controllers are always-on, secure and can be deployed anywhere. From Catalyst 9000 switches, to the Catalyst 9800 Wireless LAN Controller, to the Catalyst 9100 Access Points; Cisco has one operating system that runs all of these devices. IOS XE, which we first rolled out in 2017 on the Catalyst 9000, is the latest upgrade of Cisco's core operating system. It is modular, programmable, and supports the full capabilities of our new Intent-based networking controller, DNA Center. That means that with one simple user interface, you can automate, set policy, provide security, and gain assurance across your entire wired and wireless network fabric, from the most far-flung branch or campus to your most central core system.

Software updates with no disruptions and rolling AP upgrades completely changes the definition of "always on". With Cisco In Service Software Upgrade (ISSU), network downtime during a software update or upgrade is a thing of the past. ISSU is a complete image upgrade and update while the network is still running. The software image—or patch—is pushed onto the wireless controller while traffic forwarding continues uninterrupted. All access point and client sessions are retained during the upgrade process.

Most secure means increased threat detections in encrypted traffic and automated macro/micro segmentation. Finally, the ability to deploy on premise, in either private or public cloud with the Cisco Catalyst 9800-CL promises a freedom that no other controller offers.

If your network doesn't need a dedicated controller, we have you covered with that too. The [Cisco Embedded Wireless Controller on Catalyst Access Point](#) puts control right on the AP, delivering an easy-to-deploy and manage Wi-Fi 6 network without a dedicated appliance. Or the Embedded Wireless Controller on the Cisco Catalyst 9000 switches allows the ability to deploy Catalyst Controller functionality over Catalyst switches through the wireless controller software package via Cisco IOS XE.

So while the light from Wireless AireOS Controllers may be dimming, its contributions across the technology world will never be forgotten. Not only that, but the Cisco Catalyst 9800 Controllers will continue to shine that light in the future.

For more information on Wireless AireOS Controller EOL announcement, click [here](#) and look under Resources. To learn more about the Cisco Catalyst 9800 Controller family, click [here](#).

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8 Comments

- **Tmiller** says:

[February 1, 2021 at 8:57 am](#)

Nice

- **Asif** says:

[February 2, 2021 at 3:37 am](#)

We will remember you as Hero AireOS !! 😊

- **Peter** says:

[February 2, 2021 at 5:07 am](#)

A long time coming. I always thought the wireless systems were the most advanced and led the way for early programmability and management. CNA was far behind NCM then Prime.

The achilles heel was the requirements to take down the entire wireless

network for upgrades. ISSU was a possibility within IOS since 2010. Very happy to see this has been overcome. Can't wait to test it out.

- **John says:**

[February 2, 2021 at 9:28 am](#)

I thought they tried this before, and it was a disaster. I believe it was the 5760 WLC. We pulled it after about 3 months and went back to Airos. Everything was fine after that. I hope they change their mind and still offer Airos WLC's in the future.

- **Pete C says:**

[February 2, 2021 at 5:27 pm](#)

If it makes you feel better, I felt the same way. Now I've deployed about 15 pairs of 9800 controllers I can say I don't miss AirOS at all. Yes, there are issues like bugs with QoS and AVC usability today. There are also some random GUI issues. Many of the promises of NetConf/RestConf manageability have a long way to go on reliability and feature richness.

Here's what I love: ISSU works - I can do near hitless rolling upgrades of APs and controllers. There's a logical hierarchy to TAG based policy flow. We get human readable and usable CLI! Have over 500K user devices on them and counting - rock solid!

I'm no easy to please fan boy when it comes to network vendors. Cisco has burned me with new more than once, dying ISR 4K clocks and Cat6K Sup720 ACL resequence bug that took down a 10K seat call center with. I think your concerns of the next best thing hype are well placed! I would test drive this one a bit and see what you think. The good news is you can do it for free as a VM. Simple download the OVA, spin it up, connect it an existing SmartLicensing account with AP licenses to spare, and have a good day. You only need to pay if you want support. So, don't need to stress about whatifs when you can test drive for free.

- **Dan says:**

[February 6, 2021 at 10:51 pm](#)

I'm preparing to transition from an all-AireOS environment to a company that is full-blown IOS XE....and I couldn't be more excited!

- **Robin says:**

[February 10, 2021 at 10:58 pm](#)

Luckily AireOS will be history.

- **Amir Sharafi says:**

[February 23, 2021 at 9:04 am](#)

I remember my first AireOS TTT "Train the trainer" in the offices of Gigawave in San Antonio. First time talking about LWAPP and touching the ugly 1010/1020/1030 APs.

Nowbody knew what is going on and why the APs do not join the 4100 and 4400 WLCs. What is option 43? What the hell is going on... So had a lot of fun...

I am a little bit sad and poignant.

RIP AireOS...

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