

COVER STORY MARY KIRBY PHILADELPHIA

Future looks bleak for US 50-seaters

Mainline carriers rush to optimise feeder capacity as fuel price hikes put smaller regional jets out of favour

Growing concern about a potential glut of 50-seat regional jets in the USA is being expressed by major industry consultants, following moves by mainline operators to slash or optimise regional capacity.

Aviation forecasting firm The Boyd Group says there are "just over 1,600 regional jet airliners operating in the USA, all within the well-defined segment of small jet providers". Mainline airlines "are leasing out fleets of regional jets that today represent several hundred units in excess of what the market can support".

Based on the company's 2008-2017 *Fleet Demand & Trend Forecast*, there will be over 800 fewer of these regional jets in the US skies. "This figure may now be conservative with Jet-A [fuel] heading over \$3 a gallon," says The Boyd Group. The bottom line, it says, is that comprehensive network carriers in the USA "will be moving to cut as much leased-in regional jet lift as possible, as soon as possible. It may mean reworking summer 2008 schedules".

The latest indicator of a 50-seat squeeze came last week when



There is speculation as to the effect the Delta and Northwest merger will have on their regional subsidiaries

Continental Airlines revealed it will slash regional capacity this autumn. Republic Airways Holdings subsidiary Chautauqua Airlines, which flies on behalf of Continental, is to begin culling its Bombardier CRJ200s fleet for the US major.

Additionally, Continental is in talks with long-term partner ExpressJet to negotiate "better economics" with the regional for its operation of Embraer ERJ-145s. The potential fallout has yet to be determined.

Fellow SkyTeam partners Delta Air Lines and Northwest Airlines have announced plans to merge

operations. Delta owns Comair, while Northwest owns Compass Airlines and Mesaba. Questions remain about the level of impact the move will have on regionals.

Delta in March decided to drop a contract with Mesa Air Group unit Freedom Airlines for the operation of 34 Embraer ERJ-145s as part of a larger plan to shed 60-70 regional jets from its network.

What is clear is that the new combined operator will continue to rationalise its network domestically. "Our goal over the long run is for our margins in that business to be equivalent to the margins in the mainline busi-

ness," says Delta chief executive Richard Anderson.

Additionally, Delta in March decided to terminate a contract with Mesa Air Group unit Freedom Airlines for the operation of 34 Embraer ERJ-145s. Mesa responded by filing a lawsuit.

With the US outlook bleak, Embraer expects growing demand for 50-seat regional jets in non-traditional markets such as Asia and Latin America to help "compensate".

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Turboprops are piling the pressure on regional jets: flightglobal.com/regionals2007

INVESTIGATION DAVID KAMINSKI-MORROW LONDON

Pilot fatigue cited in Shuttle America E-170 overrun

US investigators have concluded that a Shuttle America Embraer 170 regional jet slid off the end of a Cleveland runway last year in snow after the crew failed to conduct a go-around despite indistinct visual cues during the approach.

However, the National Transportation Safety Board has also criticised the captain's decision not to remove himself from duty, despite suffering from fatigue.

The Delta Connection flight on 18 February 2007 suffered a collapsed nose-gear as it overran and struck an instrument landing system (ILS) antenna and the airport's perimeter fence. Investiga-

tors found the crew descended to the ILS decision height, instead of the minimum descent altitude, despite being advised the glide-slope was unavailable. The NTSB says the pilots should have performed the approach based on localiser minimums.

The first officer landed long on the contaminated runway 28 which, at 1,833m (6,014ft), was relatively short. Investigators found that the pilots then failed to use effective braking and reverse thrust, adding that the aircraft would have otherwise probably stopped in time.

"When the first officer lost sight of the runway just before

landing, he should have abandoned the landing attempt and immediately executed a missed approach," says the NTSB.

The captain's fatigue affected his ability to plan and monitor the approach

But the inquiry also cites the contribution of the captain's fatigue and says this affected his ability to plan and monitor the approach. "By not advising Shuttle America of this fatigue or removing himself from duty," it says,

"the captain placed himself, his crew and his passengers in a dangerous situation that could have been avoided," it says. "Another contributing factor was Shuttle America's failure to administer an attendance policy that permitted flight-crew members to call in as fatigued without fear of reprisals."

In addition to recommending specific training for conducting approaches to contaminated runways and go-arounds in deteriorating visual conditions, the NTSB says that operators, with unions and airline associations, draw up a standardised policy allowing crews to decline assignments if impaired by lack of sleep.