

Alaska Airlines Implements New Ground Air Units, Retrofits 737s With Winglets to Conserve Fuel and Reduce Emissions

2008-06-30

Alaska Airlines announced today it is now using mobile ground-based air units for cabin venting, cooling and heat on parked aircraft at nearly all its gates at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

The airline also announced it has retrofitted all its 737s capable of using blended winglets. The two projects are the latest in a series of ongoing initiatives by the carrier to conserve fuel and reduce carbon emissions.

Since 2002, these efforts have reduced the amount of fuel Alaska Airlines uses to transport one passenger one mile by 17 percent. The accompanying reduction in carbon dioxide emissions is equivalent to taking 130,000 cars off the road for one year.

The diesel-powered preconditioned air units, along with ground-based electrical power, replace the use of an aircraft's onboard auxiliary power unit (APU), which runs on jet fuel. The ground-based units burn about 10 times less fuel than APUs, meaning the new units will significantly reduce costs and benefit the environment by lowering carbon emissions.

At Sea-Tac Airport, the use of preconditioned air units at 19 gates is expected to conserve more than 1.1 million gallons of fuel per year, saving the company \$2.6 million annually based on the current pump price, said Kristin Fuson, an Alaska Airlines flight operations engineer and the project manager. Although the units burn diesel fuel, carbon dioxide emissions will be reduced by 24 million pounds a year because of dramatically less fuel burn, Fuson said.

Annual savings will more than double to 2.4 million gallons of fuel and \$5.5 million once the units are in place at Alaska Airlines' other hubs in Anchorage, LAX, Portland and San Francisco later in the year.

Alaska Airlines had been moving toward using ground-based air units for about two years. The units make even better economic sense with oil prices hovering around \$135 a barrel, Fuson said.

The airline has purchased or leased 33 mobile air units for the five hub airports. Even with the initial cost of \$65,000 per unit, the machines pay for themselves in about 1 1/2 years, Fuson said. If the project is successful, more units will be purchased for other airports. Starting in September, some fixed units will be installed at all the hubs. The fixed units are powered by electricity from the airports and do not burn fuel or produce emissions.

Earlier this month, Alaska Airlines also completed retrofitting all its existing 737s capable of using blended winglets. All new aircraft are delivered with blended winglets.

Winglets improve an aircraft's fuel efficiency and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by about 3 percent -- or some 100,000 gallons a year per aircraft. The winglets are manufactured by Seattle-based Aviation Partners Boeing. By the end of this year, Alaska Airlines will be flying 74 Next-Generation 737s with winglets, representing 64 percent of its 116-aircraft fleet.

"The gold standard in winglets, our technology has saved the industry and the world community more than 1 billion gallons of fuel to date with projected additional fuel savings of more than 175 million gallons in 2008," said Joe Clark, Aviation Partners Boeing founder and chairman. "No other airplane modification will provide the fuel savings and eco-friendly benefits of our blended winglet technology."

Alaska Airlines has undertaken several other fuel-saving initiatives in the past year. Among them:

-- Speeding up retirement of its MD-80s to fly only fuel-efficient 737s. The airline's remaining seven MD-80s will be taken out of service Aug. 25 instead of the end of December, as originally planned.

-- Using only one engine when taxiing jets for maintenance to conserve fuel.

-- Employing more satellite-based navigation. Since 1996, Alaska Airlines has pioneered a technology called Required Navigation Performance. RNP enables aircraft to fly more direct routes with pinpoint accuracy and reduce diversions due to weather by using onboard navigation technology and the Global Positioning System satellite network. The airline uses RNP at remote and geographically challenging airports throughout the state of Alaska, as well as in Portland, Ore., San Francisco, Palm Springs, Calif., and at Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C.

-- Using lighter-weight catering carts. Since retrofitting all of its aircraft with lighter-weight carts in September 2006, the airline has saved nearly 300,000 gallons of fuel annually.

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