



MICRO JETS DEBUT IN U.S. AIRSPACE

July 7, 2006

A new class of jets called very light jets, or VLJs, is poised to change the way Americans travel.

Sometimes called microjets, VLJs weigh about as much as minivan, carry five to six people, and are expected to cost around \$2 million apiece -- half as much as the least expensive jet now in production.

The first VLJ to hit the runway will be the Eclipse 500, which received a provisional certification by the Federal Aviation Administration this week. Thousands more are expected to take wing over the next decade.

A flying minivan

VLJ manufacturers claim their new jets combine all the advantages of commercial jets with the flexibility of smaller turboprop planes.

Powered by new fuel-efficient engines, VLJs can fly up to heights of 41,000 feet, where the trip is much smoother, while traveling at speeds upwards of 430 miles per hour.

Due to their light weight, they can land on runways as short as 3,000 feet, opening up many smaller airports to jet travel.

Vern Raburn, founder of Eclipse Aviation, envisions a vast system of air-taxis services, appealing to passengers who don't want the hassle of big airports.

Already, more than two thirds of the 2,500 VLJs pre-ordered from Eclipse have been purchased by air-taxi operators.

The largest order was placed by DayJet, a recently launched company that plans to offer "per-seat, on-demand" services between smaller cities throughout the USA.

"This is the absolute future, and everybody in the aviation business knows it," Massachusetts Aeronautics Commission Chairman Arthur Allen told the Boston Globe.

Clogging the sky?

However, not all aviation experts are so enthusiastic.

Under the current air-traffic control systems, there is no difference between a VLJ the size of an SUV and a 747 the length of a football field.

Air-traffic controllers must treat both the same on a radar scope or while ordering landings.

FAA chief Marion Blakey estimates that if just 2 percent of current airline passengers move to VLJs, air-traffic controllers will have to handle three times as many more take-offs and landings than they currently do.

Other aviation officials fear that privately owned VLJs will be able to use the airport infrastructure without having to pay for it, leaving commercial carriers to shoulder a disproportionate burden of the costs.

In testimony before a House committee in mid-November, Basil Barimo of the U.S. Air Transport Association called on Congress to “ensure that the VLJ sector pays its fair share” of the FAA’s costs for providing air traffic services and safety oversight.

VLJs bring more than just cost issues. Because VLJs cruise at the same altitudes as commercial planes, but travel more slowly, some aviation experts fear that VLJs will clog the single-lane air-highways that criss-cross the nation.

The president of the Air Transport Association likened them to cars going 45 miles-per-hour on a crowded freeway.

Proponents of the VLJ sector dismiss those criticisms as un-reasonable. “The sky ain’t crowded above 18,000 feet,” Vern Raburn told the Associated Press.

Even Blakey noted that air-traffic control is moving away from ground-based controllers to in-cockpit global positioning systems that will allow planes to fly much closer together.

Most VLJs will come with sophisticated safety and navigation equipment: the Adam’s A700 -- a \$2 million VLJ -- comes with more advanced electronic navigation than a \$40 million Gulfstream G5.

Some aviation experts say it’s too early to tell what major safety implications may be.

"One of the big issues now is that none are flying except in test flight so we don't know what the safety issues will be. They are largely an unknown right now," said Chris Dancy, director of media relations, Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association.

Who will ride VLJs?

The manufacturers contend that VLJs will use less-traveled airports and flight paths. “The future is not flying from Logan [Boston] to O’Hare [Chicago]; it’s flying from Beverly or Lawrence [small suburban towns] to the airport that’s closest to where you are going in Illinois,” Allen said.

The reality though, is that where VLJs will go depends on what kind of passengers choose to ride them.

A report commissioned by NASA, a supporter of VLJ technology, said the aircraft would never be affordable for large numbers of people and businesses.

The committee of retired airline executives concluded that VLJs would never attract passengers if they did not serve big cities -- exactly those places where the capacity of the airports and airspace is already strained without the addition of thousands of tiny jets.

Moreover, the under-used airports where VLJs will purportedly travel are currently without the radar and navigation aids needed to land even the smallest of jets.

NASA predicts that by 2010, there will be 20,000 VLJs in service. Even critics of VLJs agree that a revolution in air travel is coming, so the question remains: Are VLJs the answer?

-- *Compiled by David Peters for NewsHour Extra*

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