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Boeing Airplane Services today announced the introduction of its 747-300 modification program with a launch order from Atlas Air for the conversion of three 747-300 Combi airplanes into full freighters.

"We are very pleased to announce the launch of our 747-300 modification program with Atlas Air," said Joseph Gullion, president of Boeing Airplane Services. "This program is a natural extension of our freighter conversion capabilities, with which we can match virtually any air cargo requirement."

Currently, there are 80 747-300 airplanes in service. Boeing Airplane Services estimates approximately 50 percent of those airplanes will be converted to freighters over the next 20 years.

"Demand for our 747 freighters continues to be strong," said Michael Chowdry, chairman, chief executive officer and president of Atlas Air, Inc. "Adding additional airplanes to our fleet through the conversion process has been one of our core business strategies to meet our customers' needs and we are pleased to be able to launch Boeing Airplane Services 747-300 conversion program."

Combi airplanes feature a large side cargo door on the main deck that permits cargo loading in the aft section while passengers board in the forward two-thirds section of the airplane.

The converted 747-300s will be capable of carrying the same volume as 747-200 modified freighters -- 26,600 cubic feet, of which 20,550 cubic feet will be on the main deck. The airplane will be able to carry approximately 235,000 pounds of revenue payload and its range will be approximately 4,200 nautical miles.

The structural difference between the -200 and -300 is that the 747's characteristic hump on the top extends 20-feet farther back on the -300 fuselage than on the -200. The -300 conversion modifies that extended space so that it can accommodate cargo.

Combi airplane freighter modifications require the removal of all passenger features on the airplane as well as the replacement of floor beams, seat tracks and floor panels to strengthen the main deck. Boeing Airplane Services installs additional powered cargo handling, smoke detection and fire suppression systems in the airplane's forward area.

Other modifications Boeing has developed to enhance freighter airplane performance and productivity include structural retrofits, such as stretching a 747 upper deck, and interior reconfiguration programs.

To date, Boeing Airplane Services' Wichita Modification Center has modified more than 90 model 747 airplanes of various configurations to special freighters. It also has converted five DC-10 and two MD-11 airplanes from passenger to freighter airplanes. In addition, Boeing Airplane Services delivered the first of 89 MD-10s to Fed Ex last month. The MD-10 is a modified DC-10 that incorporates the Boeing Advanced Common Flight Deck.

Boeing Airplane Services provides total service solutions designed to meet an airline's individual requirements. Offerings include engineering retrofit packages, avionics upgrades, in-flight entertainment systems integration, cabin management solutions, passenger-to-freighter conversions, recovery and repair services, and airplane performance improvements for all Boeing commercial airplanes. In addition, Boeing Airplane Services has the most comprehensive spare parts distribution system in the industry, with a worldwide network of distribution and service centers. It also provides technical consulting and general contracting support for passenger and cargo airlines.

Boeing Airplane Services is a unit of the Boeing Commercial Aviation Services organization, which offers the aviation industry's broadest array of support resources. As part of The Boeing Company, Boeing Airplane Services has access to all the experience and technical capabilities of the world's largest aerospace company. More than 11,000 Boeing airplanes are in operation today around the world.

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