Boeing Offers New 747-400 Freighter Conversion Program

Boeing [NYSE:BA] is offering air carriers another way to maximize the value of their 747-400s by initiating a program to convert those passenger airplanes to freighters.

"This is an excellent opportunity for operators to leverage relatively modern airplanes that may be under utilized because of the unprecedented travel downturn we've seen during the past two years," said Mike Cave, senior vice president, Boeing Commercial Aviation Services.

"There has been tremendous customer interest in Boeing offering a 747-400 passenger to freighter modification, and the customer knows that if it's a Boeing upgrade, designed and supported by Boeing, it's the same quality as they can expect in a new airplane," Cave added.

Freighter conversions comprise about two thirds of the world's current cargo fleet, and forecasts predict this trend will continue. For large freighters like the 747-400, the future fleet will be equally divided between production freighters (with their larger payloads and range capabilities and versatile nose doors) and converted freighters. This provides air cargo operators with solutions that match their unique market requirements.

The 747-400 Special Freighter is expected to be certified and enter service in late 2005. The first customers are anticipated to launch the program late this year. Boeing and Taikoo (Xiamen) Aircraft Engineering (TAECO) in Xiamen, China, will convert the program's first three airplanes, with Boeing providing detailed engineering design work and oversight, and TAECO providing touch labor on the airplanes.

For the freighter conversion, the airplane will be modified with a side cargo door and layout that is identical to the 747-400 production freighter, with 30 pallets on the main deck and comparable volume. The longer upper deck of the Special Freighter will include seating for up to 19 people, an option found on no other converted freighter. Also included in the conversion is a strengthened main-deck floor, full main-deck lining, provisions for a new cargo handling system and revised flight-deck systems.

The 747-400 Special freighter will have an estimated capacity of 250,000 pound (113 tonnes), structural payload at a design range of 4,100 nautical miles (7,600 kilometers) and will be capable of 870,000 pounds (394,625 kg) maximum takeoff weight.

"In many cases, operators want a converted airplane to match their other planes as much as possible," Cave said. "This gives Boeing a chance to support its customers not only with freight conversion, but further with packages including avionics and flight-deck upgrades, and integration of technical manuals."

This is the 10th program for converting airplanes to a freighter configuration that Boeing or Boeing licensees offer. The company also offers four dedicated freighter models.

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