

Holding Pattern and Then Some

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Jan. 30 (Bloomberg) -- Boone Pickens's pilot, who flies the billionaire from his Dallas headquarters in a Gulfstream IV, says overcrowding has made New Jersey's Teterboro the toughest airport the Texan uses.

``The congestion of airplanes and the congestion on the radio -- there is so much going on," said Jon Whisler, a corporate pilot since 1965.

Teterboro is a favorite of Pickens and company executives because it is the closest corporate airport to Manhattan. The two runways handle a flight every three minutes and almost half the amount of nearby Newark Liberty International Airport. The volume contributed to three accidents last year and a demand from New York City's transportation regulator to scale back flights.

``You can barely find the room to let the ramp down," said Michael Jackson, chief executive officer at AutoNation Inc. Teterboro is ``jammed beyond belief."

Also filling the skies is traffic from three international airports, all within 25 miles (40 kilometers) of the two-runway Teterboro. There are also executive airports in New York's Westchester County and a municipal airport in Morristown, New Jersey.

``You have a concentration of major airports and not as much airspace to work with," Whisler said.

Teterboro had more than 202,000 takeoffs and landings in 2004, a 4.4 percent increase from 2003, according to Port Authority statistics. By contrast, Newark, the hub for Continental Airlines, had 437,828 flights in and out in 2004.

FAA Resists Changes

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates Teterboro, wants to reduce flights by 10 percent and set other limits, spokesman Marc La Vorgna said. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration said it can't allow changes that would diminish public access to an airport that receives federal funds.

``The FAA is resisting us," La Vorgna said. ``Our belief is that we have the right to make these restrictions."

The airport's proposals include banning heavier planes and some older, noisier engines, La Vorgna said. Planes would have to weigh 80,000 pounds to use Teterboro, down from a current cap at 100,000. The 822-acre airport, which straddles the boroughs of Moonachie, Hasbrouck Heights and Teterboro in Bergen County, also raised user fees by 50 percent on Jan. 1.

Teterboro is the oldest continually operated airport on the East Coast. The airport, which employs more than 5,000 people, doesn't have any scheduled carrier operations. It caters to smaller aircraft, emergency flights and business jets.

VIPs' Favorite

“This is a VIP airport,” said airport manager Lanny Rider, adding that actor Harrison Ford kept three planes there. “Every big executive, celebrity or sports star at some point will come through Teterboro.”

“You've never seen a collection of that many corporate airlines in your life,” said Scotts Miracle-Gro Co. Chief Executive Officer James Hagedorn, a former Air Force pilot who spent seven years transporting nuclear weapons. Hagedorn, who lives on New York's Long Island, flies out of Teterboro to his company's headquarters in Maryville, Ohio.

Last February, a chartered jet plowed through a fence and across 300 feet of buffer before breaching a commuter road and slamming into a clothing warehouse.

Twenty people, including two who had been in a car on the highway, were taken to hospitals. People living nearby say the outcome could have been far worse if the crash hadn't occurred while cars were stopped for a red light on Route 46.

Airport a Danger?

“The airport is an imminent danger to our public safety, health and quality of life,” said Paul Griffo, a physics professor at Bergen Community College in Paramus and an activist who has lived near the airport since 1976. The Port Authority “has finally gotten around to realizing they need to do something.”

Congestion at the airport may worsen. Honeywell International Inc., the world's biggest maker of airplane cockpit controls, expects about 9,900 business jets to be delivered in the next 10 years. Deliveries will likely peak in 2006 or 2007 and exceed 800 planes a year for the rest of the decade, about a third more than in 2004.

Hagedorn said it wasn't uncommon already to wait an hour just to get a spot in the takeoff lineup.

“If it gets any worse, we'll rethink using the airport,” said William Parrett, global chief executive officer of New York-based Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu. Deloitte doesn't own any aircraft though sometimes charters. “If you can't leave or come back when you want, it takes away the reason you use a private aircraft.”

Medical Emergencies

In addition to the chartered flights, organ donations for transplant in the New York metropolitan area are transported via Teterboro. Denver-based Quest Diagnostics Inc. operates a 3,000-employee medical-testing laboratory alongside the airport, where it analyzes blood and tissue samples that are flown in.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York uses Teterboro to move most of the checks it processes, although those operations are being moved to Philadelphia later this year, Fed spokeswoman Linda Ricci said.

The Port Authority is also working to reduce the amount of charters used by banks, which Rider said accounts for as much as 40 percent of total Teterboro volume.

U.S. Representative Steven Rothman, who represents the area around Teterboro and serves on the House subcommittee that oversees the FAA budget, has called on the Port Authority to impose the restrictions.

“I believe that the steps the Port Authority wants to take to improve operations are reasonable and they should go ahead, and not worry the FAA would try to retaliate,” Rothman, 53, said in a telephone interview.

Congressman Does Battle

Rothman said he was able to stop plans by two charter airlines to exploit an FAA loophole and allow regularly scheduled charter service into Teterboro. Rothman also said he forced the FAA to rescind a statement that it would consider requests for heavier planes to use Teterboro, including a 170,000-pound business jetliner made by Boeing Co.

“If the FAA were to punish the Port Authority for taking any of these actions, I would use every ounce of strength I had, and every bit of support I have on the House subcommittee, and every other legislative means, to make the FAA wish that they had never even heard of Teterboro,” said Rothman, a Democrat.

The FAA is funding a \$1.7 million regional airport capacity and demand study, focusing on Teterboro and eight other airports in the Northeast.

In the meantime, pilots and passengers cope with Teterboro. Some, like Hagedorn, try and avoid the airport.

“I’d rather be in traffic on the Long Island Expressway,” he said.