

The Impact of the Charter Jet Industry on Air Traffic Control

By: Brian Taranto

02.10.09

When someone thinks about the charter jet industry, they typically think about high profile celebrities, fortune 500 CEO's, and popular sports teams paying top dollar for the charter companies services. One would imagine that chartering a jet could be, in some cases, more expensive than buying a house. The truth is that in today's economy chartering a jet has become affordable to not only the elite few but also to the average working family trying to make it through the day. Due to the increasing demand for the services of charter companies their price has gone down and their impact on the air-traffic control system has gone up. This creates a strain not only on our air-traffic system but on our national airspace system as well.

We all know that air travel went down in the United States after 9/11. These attacks took a huge toll on the American economy and for a year or so diminished the strength of the airline companies. People didn't feel safe to fly, didn't want to spend the money on a ticket, and didn't trust the airlines providing them services. So whom did they turn too? Charter jet companies recognized this opportunity and took a chance to capitalize on it. They boasted that they had great prices, safe pilots, and could offer the average person a safe and private flight. The public quickly caught on and the charter jet industry boomed. All sorts of people were using their services ranging from your average household family all the way up to high profile figures. The increased charter jet presence in the air made smaller airports more popular and larger airports even larger.

It is projected that through the next 10 – 20 years the air traffic within the United States is going to increase by a third resulting in an increased demand for the controlled supervision of aircraft. Currently the primary means of controlling aircraft in the United States is the air traffic control system. This is a system of people performing various duties from controlling aircraft to controlling the people controlling aircraft.

Their main goal is to provide and expedite the fast, safe, and continuous flow of air traffic in and out of airports while providing aircraft separation between Instrument and Visual flights. Being one of the most stressful jobs to hold in America, and increased amount of air traffic will take its toll on the system and its workers. This has caused the FAA to look at alternatives for controlling the increased presence of aircraft.

Currently the charter jet industry, composed primarily of corporate planes, fractionally owned planes, and air taxi/charter companies, accounts for 60% of all air traffic in the United states. This is presenting a huge problem in that over 35 major airports in the United States face a real possibility of becoming crowded within the next 10 years, thus requiring a more efficient system to deal with the traffic. There are two main ways to deal with increasing air traffic: making the airports bigger or increasing the efficiency of each airport. One popular way that has been proposed for controlling aircraft is called NextGen. NextGen will primarily address the following issues: developed but not full implemented aircraft communication with ATC, the use of specialized approach and departure procedures as a standard at all airports, the improved management of wake turbulence, and a centralized computer management system to provide guidance for aircraft on the ground. NextGen will reduce the workload on ATC personal and allow them to focus more on the traffic already in the air. However, the cost of funding NextGen far exceeds the capital allocated to the FAA for the maintaining the national airspace system. In order to offset this cost, the FAA has been trying to pass a bill allowing them to charge aircraft for the use of the national airspace system. These fees are called, "User Fees."

When talking about our national airspace system, 40% of taxes paid for funding comes from the airlines while the other 60% comes from general aviation. If the User Fee bill passes, then the gap between the two respectively will become wider. User fees can be applied to the a/c for a number of things, the most common of which would be clearance into and out of an airports airspace. The user fees bill can have both negative and positive effects for the charter jet industry. First and foremost, it will limit the number of airports a single company can fly to and from due to the fees they would be

paying. Secondly, it will separate general aviation from commercial aviation because more popular airports will have higher user fees than smaller more local airports. This will result in a monopoly of sorts by helping to prevent general aviation from interfering with commercial aviation. Lastly, it will create revenue for the FAA to implement safer and more organized ways for dealing with increased airflow traffic. However, on the other side of the microphone air traffic control will have to deal with the hassle of charging and keeping track of aircraft who have yet to and already did pay their fees, as well as, restricting the places traveled by private and general aviation, thus reducing tourism.

The user bill will be both a positive and negative thing for charter jet companies. It will help reduce the traffic in larger airports, allowing for a better flow of traffic in and out of those airports, thus increasing the number of flights that a charter company can make to and from that airport. Since most charter companies have the ability to fly in and out of smaller more general aviation airports it will also make chartering a flight to a remote location more efficient. Due to the fees being imposed, charter flights might be more noticeable in larger airports but their profit might go down, so in the end it is a trade off. Charter companies will have a better chance of booking flights through more popular airports but at a capital cost. So while the congestion that air traffic control has to deal with will decrease in larger airports the opposite it more likely to happen in smaller airports.

Another factor that has been affecting the amount of traffic air traffic controller's deal with on a daily basis is the invention of the VLJ, or very light jet. First brought to the market in 2006, VLJ's quickly became the center of attraction for business and private individuals looking for a more efficient, comfortable, convenient way of traveling. Today, about 98% of US air travelers fly through only 460 commercial airports, and 70% of those flights are in and out of only 30 major airports. More than 95% of Americans live within a 30-minute drive to an airport big enough to handle a VLJ. This only complexes the amount of work an air traffic controller has to deal with. VLJ's have both an upside and down side. The positive side is they are preferred over your more

conventional jet and so have increased the revenue created from their use. They also allow for smaller airports to be reached due to their ability in some cases to land on runways as little as 3000ft. However, since their introduction into the air traffic system in 2006 their presence has increased from just 500 VLJ's in the US to a projected 3,500 VLJ's by the year 2015.

Another down side to VLJ is their performance. One of the main jobs of the air traffic control system is to expedite the flow of traffic in and out of an airport. This is done with the help of separation minima (distance between two planes) and approach and departure procedures. Unfortunately, VLJ's have a relatively slow climb rate compared to bigger or commercial jets. They also cruise at somewhat slower speeds. This puts a strain on air traffic controller personal because it increases the time and distance required in order to have the minima separation in place for the next departure or arrival.

So over all has the Charter Jet industry had an affect on air traffic control? The answer is really a coin toss. It depends on how you look at the situation. On the heads side it paves the way by requiring more efficient means of dealing with traffic. Programs like NextGen and User Fees can be beneficial to air traffic controllers allowing for safer more organized flow as well as the restriction of flow to and from airports. They also create funding for the national airspace system making it able to constantly update itself in terms of the equipment used by air traffic controller, which in some airports can be in upwards of 40 years old. It also allows for the updating of current procedures used for departures and arrivals. However, especially with the invention of the VLJ, they create more traffic flow not only in and out of smaller general aviation airports but larger more commercial airports like Logan International in Boston, MA or JFK international in NYC, NY. One thing though is for certain, if the current air traffic system doesn't adapt to the rapidly increasing air traffic created by the charter industry, it will quickly collapse and we as the public will see the demise of private and general aviation.

Works Sited:

Air Charter Services. Hoover's Industry. 8 Feb. 2009 <http://www.hoovers.com/air-charter-services/--ID__339--/free-ind-fr-profile-basic.xhtml>.

GAO Finds Varied VLJ Forecast. 4 Sept. 2007. GAO. 7 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/generic/story.jsp?id=news/VLJ09047.xml&headline=GAO%20Finds%20Varied%20VLJ%20Forecasts,%20Little%20Airspace%20Impact&channel=busav>>.

Light Jet Air Charter Expected to Rise. 27 Dec. 2005. Globe Staff. 7 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.avchart.com/charter-news-details.asp?ID=32>>.

Reform of the Air Traffic Control System. 30 Nov. 2005. The reason foundation. 8 Feb.

2009 <<http://walker-foundation.org/net/org/project.aspx?projectid=40469&s=9812.0.69.5316>>.