Airlines Add Service in North Dakota's Oil Patch

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Airlines are boosting service to North Dakota to haul in workers drawn by the state's oil boom.

Delta Air Lines Inc. said Monday that it will add two round-trips a day between Minneapolis and Williston, N.D. And United Airlines is set to add three round-trip flights a day between Denver and Williston in November. Other North Dakota airports have added service, too.

North Dakota oil production has more than tripled in the last three years, and it's now the second-biggest oil-producing state, behind Texas. Air traffic has boomed, too.

"Williston is basically the center hub of it, so we see quite a bit of traffic," said Steven Kjergaard, the airport manager there.

The additional air demand is straining resources at North Dakota airports.

Williston's Sloulin Field International Airport was built to handle 6,000 passenger boardings per year. Kjergaard expects more than 10 times that many next year.

The waiting room has just 41 chairs in the secure area. Kjergaard plans to haul in a double-wide trailer to hold 80 more seats by the time the United flights start in November. "It's going to be an interesting compromise," he said.

The airport runway was rated for a maximum weight of 25,000 pounds. The city agreed to change it to 53,000 pounds to handle the bigger jets.

At North Dakota's Minot International Airport, the terminal was built to handle two airlines. It now has service from Allegiant, as well as United and Delta. Frontier is coming, too.

"Now we're cramming in a fourth. So the facility is extremely tight," said airport manager Andrew Solsvig. The schedule for its two gates was so full, he told Frontier they could only come if they would use the leftover slots.

The airport had a federal grant to guarantee that United would make enough money on the flights that started there in 2010. Solsvig said the money went back to the feds, because the flights were so full that United never needed the subsidy.

Delta added flights last year. Minot now has seven daily flights to Minneapolis on Delta, four a day to Denver on United, and Allegiant is flying twice a week to Phoenix and four times a week to Las Vegas. Frontier begins flying in November to Denver, four times per week.

Most of the Delta and United flights in the area are on smaller regional jets operated by partners, although Delta operates some Minot flights itself on larger Airbus A320s.

Delta said other cities with oil-related jumps in traffic include Minot, Bismarck, Fargo and Grand Forks in North Dakota, as well as Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska, and Edmonton, Alberta.

For Delta and United Continental Holdings Inc., the flights are very, very small parts of their global operation. But they're a big deal for the cities in North Dakota that are getting expanded air service.

"The airline would add a flight, and three months later it would be full. They'd add another one, and it would fill up," said Solsvig, the manager in Minot.

In Dickinson, N.D., the number of people getting on planes jumped 83 percent last year.

The city gets flights from Great Lakes Aviation right now. But those 30-seat propeller planes often have to fly with empty seats because of restrictions on safe takeoff weights, said airport manager Matthew Remynse. The airport is working with a consultant to lure other airlines. "We're out of capacity," he said.

Space will be tight. Besides commercial flights, the airport has seen an influx of private planes.

"There've been days when they've had so many aircraft on the ramp, they've asked us to shut down the taxiways so they could park aircraft on the taxiway," Remynse said.

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