

A launch order for 50 aircraft from FedEx generated interest in the Loadmaster



Master of the Loads

The Ayres Loadmaster seems to be the answer for those who want an aircraft bigger than the Cessna Caravan

GRAHAM WARWICK/WASHINGTON DC

KATHMANDU IS a long way from Albany, Georgia, but the power of the Internet has brought Ayres' Loadmaster to the attention of an operator in the Nepal capital, and others in places as far afield as Papua New Guinea and South Africa.

Enquiries from these, and others, have left president Fred Ayres a little surprised, but pleased, by the interest generated by his utility turboprop. Having a launch order from FedEx for 50 aircraft, plus options for another 200, certainly helps, but Ayres seems to have tapped a rich vein of demand for a simple, unpressurised, fixed-gear aircraft from operators wanting something bigger than a Cessna Caravan I.

Initially, the LM200 Loadmaster is being developed as a freighter, designed to carry a payload of up to 3,400kg over a range of almost 1,100km (600nm) but, spurred by customer interest, Ayres already has passenger/cargo, air-tour, floatplane, surveillance and military-transport variants on the drawing board. "There is a market out there for an aircraft larger than the Caravan," Ayres concludes.

When Ayres acquired Rockwell's Thrush Commander agricultural-aircraft line in 1977,

there was already a design for a single-turboprop utility aircraft, the Bushmaster, which used the powerplant, wing and tail of the Turbo Thrush. Plans were put on hold by the recession of the early 1980s. "Then the Caravan comes along and it's almost identical in size," Ayres recalls. The company decided against competing with Cessna and diversified, taking on subcontract work for Boeing and McDonnell Douglas as well as for FedEx.

The utility-aircraft design was dusted off in the early 1990s. "The Caravan had done well,

and there was a possible market for an aircraft of the same size," explains Ayres. Discussions began with FedEx, but the package carrier wanted an aircraft bigger than the Caravan, which it already operated in large numbers. The Caravan has a 3,630kg take-off weight, so Ayres decided to move up to 5,670kg, the maximum allowed for a single-engined aircraft. This was still not enough for FedEx, which wanted an aircraft able to carry its "demi" cargo containers.

Ayres pushed the gross weight up to 8,620kg and sought an exemption from the US Federal Aviation Administration to allow single-engine cargo-only operations at this weight, "...but a spate of commuter accidents had hardened the FAA's position", Ayres says. To overcome this limitation, a "twin-barrel" propulsion system was conceived, with two engines driving a single propeller via a combining gearbox, enabling ►



A military-transport version has already been offered to Australia, but was not accepted