

COMMUNICATIONS EMMA KELLY / LONDON

En route datalink moves closer after industry agrees standards

Lufthansa could have equipment ready by late 2003 as Europe's US-compatible Link 2000+ gets green light

The implementation of en route datalink communications in Europe has moved a step closer with the continent's air navigation service providers, airline associations and industry approving interoperability standards to support Europe's Link 2000+ datalink programme. Lufthansa is likely to be the first European carrier to equip for datalink communications in a programme that will see its introduction across at least 11 European states by 2007.

Europe has adopted the European Organisation for Civil Aviation Equipment's (EUROCAE) document ED110 that will allow the initial introduction of basic en route communications between sectors and centres, requesting and issuing air

traffic control clearances and microphone checks via VHF data link mode 2 (VDL-2) rather than voice communications.

Departure clearance and digital automatic terminal information service will continue to operate over the aircraft communications addressing and reporting system (ACARS) and will migrate to VDL-2 as the number of equipped aircraft rises. Future Air Navigation System (FANS-1/A)-equipped aircraft will be accommodated using the aeronautical telecommunication network.

The move to datalink communications is seen as vital to allow the European air traffic management system to cope with growing traffic levels. It is intended to reduce the communications workload for

air traffic controllers and pilots, increase communication reliability and allow the exchange of information between airborne and ground-based systems, resulting in increased sector capacity.

Eurocontrol's Link 2000+ plan is compatible with the US Federal Aviation Administration's Build 1A programme for controller-pilot datalink communications, which will also use VDL-2 for en route communications.

Lufthansa is likely to be the first European airline to be equipped for the programme in the last quarter of 2003, following certification of its Honeywell avionics, says Alex Wandels, Eurocontrol Link 2000+ programme manager. The Air France Group, Alitalia, Iberia, KLM

and Swiss are also expressing interest in becoming pioneers, he says.

Eurocontrol aims for 25% of the fleet operating in Europe to be datalink-equipped by 2007, which may be overly optimistic, concedes Wandels. Airlines will be offered financial incentives to move to datalink communications, with these details due to be finalised by year-end. Incentives are likely to be based on route charge modulation, says Wandels, with datalink-equipped aircraft being charged 5% less than non-equipped ones, for example.

With many airlines already equipping with VDL for airline operational communications, the additional cost for air traffic control datalink is between \$20,000 and \$28,000 per aircraft.

CONVERSIONS

Turboprops offered door to future

Efforts are under way to ensure a long-term future for large turboprop airliners through freight door conversions of the ATR family and BAe ATP. Large cargo door conversions of airliners from both manufacturers made public debuts at last month's Farnborough air show.

The ATP freighter is being developed by cargo airline West Air Sweden in conjunction with BAe Systems, with conversions carried out at the airline's facilities in Lidköping, Sweden. The freighter version has an 8,500kg (18,700lb) payload and can carry up to eight LD3 or five LD4 containers and pallets. The installation of the 6 x 1.7m high (104 x 68in) cargo door and E Class cargo interior is priced at \$1 million.

West Air has eight ATPs in service and intends to install the door on additional aircraft at a rate of four a year. Its ATP freighters are marketed to operators on a cost per hour basis.

The aircraft offers a similar capability to the freighter version of the



West Air has developed the ATP's large cargo door with BAe Systems

ATR 72, but "the ATP is lighter and has 2% lower fuel consumption, but maintenance costs are higher", says West Air chief executive Gustaf Thureborn, adding: "We are working to lower them."

The airline aims to acquire two more ATPs this year. West Air is expanding operations across Europe, recently purchasing French freight carrier Air Provence and set-

ting up a base in Luxembourg.

Meanwhile, ATR partner Finmeccanica's maintenance arm Aeronavali is to install large cargo doors in four ATR 72s for Alaskan carrier Northern Air Cargo. It follows certification of the first large-door ATR 72 conversion by Aeronavali, for parcels carrier Farnair, which will fly the aircraft on FedEx Express's European network.

WORKSHOP

■ Virgin Atlantic and Air France Industries (AFI) have signed a major deal extending their fleet support services co-operation to the A340-600. The co-operation was developed by both companies for the A340-300. AFI will provide component support for Virgin's planned fleet of 10 A340-600s, setting up a maintenance back-up at London Heathrow, where the UK airline is opening a hangar facility. It will offer component overhaul for A340-300/600s and A330s and will also provide access to the spare parts pool. ■ Sabena Technics is to provide full support for a Boeing 737-300 operated by **Mondair** under a three-year contract and has been contracted to provide A and C checks for a **Euralair Horizons** Airbus A310-300 under a three-year deal. Sabena Technics has also been contracted by **Lithuanian Airlines** to test, repair and overhaul most of the components on two 737-200 Advcs and two 737-300s.