

# EasyJet to test infrared ash detectors on planes

June 4 2010, By JANE WARDELL , AP Business Writer

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(AP) -- Low-cost airline easyJet PLC unveiled plans Friday to test infrared technology's ability to detect volcanic ash clouds and urged other airlines to help map the ash risk across Europe's skies.

The company said the devices - which are placed on an aircraft's tail fin and can detect ash clouds within 60 miles (100 kilometers) - are the first of their kind, calling them "essentially a weather radar for ash."

The airline is spending 1 million pounds (\$1.46 million) developing and testing the technology with aircraft manufacturer Airbus and hopes to roll out the devices in a dozen planes by the end of the year. The devices aim to prevent a repeat of the five-day shutdown of European airspace in April caused by an erupting Icelandic volcano that affected 10 million passengers worldwide.

The AVOID - Airborne Volcanic Object Identifier and Detector - technology is designed to work like the weather detection systems already in use for spotting thunderstorms. A lightweight infrared device would provide images to the pilots and an airline's flight control center, enabling pilots to see an ash cloud at altitudes between 5,000 and 50,000 feet (1,524 to 15,240 meters) high.

"This pioneering technology is the silver bullet that will make large-scale ash disruption history," easyJet CEO Andy Harrison told reporters.

However, use of the devices will need approval from regulators across

Europe and industrywide adoption to have a significant effect.

Jeremie Teahan, a spokesman for the European Aviation Safety Agency, said the regulator welcomed "applications to certify any equipment that has the potential to increase flight safety" but noted that one had not yet been received from easyJet.

Other airlines were noncommittal.

Virgin Atlantic Airways said it "welcomes the testing of any technology that could play a role, when proven and certified, in preventing a repeat of the unnecessary blanket closures of U.K. airspace." In a similar statement, British Airways PLC said it would await test results.

Justin Dubon, a spokesman for the Toulouse, France-based Airbus, said his company has no plans beyond its initial testing with easyJet - the airline is using an Airbus A340 test plane for a trial within the next couple of months before rolling the device out for wider testing on its own aircraft.

Dubon said it was up to easyJet how the device is eventually sold to other airlines and Airbus had no plans to include it on all their jets.

Harrison said the airline hadn't worked out the commercial details, but intended to share the technology, which was developed by a senior scientist at the Norwegian Institute for Air Research.

"What we don't want to do is to gain a commercial advantage over other airlines so we can fly and they can't," Harrison said. "This is a huge leap forward and the best thing is to get this technology on hundreds of planes operated by a number of airlines."

The unprecedented closure of European airspace in April caused losses

of more than euro2.5 billion (\$3.3 billion) to airlines and other related businesses.

Airlines have blamed European regulators, saying they overreacted and have demanded that internationally recognized standards of ash contamination be set.

EasyJet, which lost up to 75 million pounds (\$109 million) due to the airspace closures, is one of a number of airlines seeking compensation from European governments.

Andrew Haines, the chief executive of Britain's Civil Aviation Authority, defended the decision to close airspaces, saying aircraft manufacturers did not provide any information about what was a safe level of ash.

Few doubt that flying directly into an ash cloud could disable an aircraft. But it remains unclear whether the abrasive particles present a hazard to the jets outside the immediate area of the volcanic plume.

Haines welcomed easyJet's testing of new technology.

"I very much hope this is a sign that the industry is going to play its part ... rather than pretending the risk doesn't exist," he said.

Fred Prata, the scientist behind the devices, has been developing the technology for some 20 years, carrying out tests near erupting volcanoes.

Still, some scientists expressed skepticism about the new technology.

Colin Brown, director of engineering at the Institution of Mechanical Engineers in London, that while experts welcomed efforts to gather data, the new technology "should not be seen as a silver bullet that will allow

unlimited flying."

"It is not the pilot who directs the plane but the air traffic control staff, and thus evasive action may well be slower and less effective in order to maintain that control," he said.

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