

iPads fuel flight of paperless planes

March 18 2011, By Alan Levin

Tablet computers such as the iPad are revolutionizing aircraft cockpits as tens of thousands of private pilots bring the powerful mini-computers into planes. Several of the nation's largest airlines are poised to follow suit.

The [Federal Aviation Administration](#) this year for the first time granted approval for two commercial operators to use iPads instead of the bulky paper charts and manuals that pilots have been required to carry since the birth of modern aviation. Alaska Airlines is testing iPads in some of its planes, and Delta Air Lines and [American Airlines](#) say they're planning on launching tests soon.

Safety advocates also are enthusiastic about tablet computers, but warn that there could be a downside: more distractions in the cockpit. "It's a two-sided coin," says National [Transportation Safety Board](#) Chairman Debbie Hersman.

While the devices could become inexpensive safety warning systems for weather and other uses, distractions have increasingly played a role in NTSB accident investigations. On Oct. 21, 2009, a Northwest Airlines flight crew working on their laptops stopped talking to controllers and flew past their destination.

Concerns about distractions have not slowed sales of the devices. Private pilots, who do not need FAA approval to use the devices, have vaulted aviation software firms into the top-seller lists at Apple's App Store. Pilots say the iPad is faster, lighter and more versatile than paper.

Another attraction is cost: airlines are hoping to save millions of dollars a year in reduced fuel and paper.

"Any pilot who looks at it, wants it," says Michael Klein, president of OpenAir, a Gaithersburg, Md., charter operator. "It's better than paper. It does everything for you. It's amazing."

Klein says he uses the iPad on all his personal flights and is hoping to receive FAA permission soon to use it while carrying paying customers.

Before commercial operators can use the iPad, they have had to demonstrate to the FAA that it can withstand an explosive decompression, that it doesn't emit radio waves that could interfere with a plane's electronics and that it is reliable.

The FAA also shares the concern about the device becoming a possible distraction, says spokesman Les Dorr. Under a directive issued after the Northwest incident, airlines are expected to improve training and review internal policies to ensure that electronic devices do not create distractions, Dorr says.

The rush to bring iPads into the cockpit has helped the fortunes of aviation firms, both large and small.

The iPad app for pilots created by a four-person Houston software firm, ForeFlight, became the largest grossing weather-related app at Apple.

"It has really vaulted our company into the stratosphere," says Tyson Weihs, a co-founder of the company. Weihs predicts that by year's end 25 percent of the nearly 600,000 licensed pilots will be using iPads or similar devices when they fly.

Jeppesen, which supplies airlines with paper charts, has also entered the

market, already selling versions of its software for the [iPad](#).

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