

Airlines get creative in cutting cost

NEW YORK: Airlines in the United States are scrutinising every step of their operations, from the tarmac to the sky, and from the nose to the tail of their planes, searching for new ways to cut their soaring fuel bills.

They are power-washing jet engines more often to get rid of grime, carrying less water for the washroom taps and toilets, and replacing seats with lighter models.

The financial pain of higher fuel prices is particularly acute for airlines because it is their single biggest expense. Eight years ago, 15 per cent of the price of an aeroplane ticket went to pay for jet fuel; now, it is 40 per cent, according to the Air Transport Association, the industry's trade group.

If prices stay where they are, the nation's airlines will collectively spend US\$61.2 billion (S\$83.8 billion) this year on jet fuel - more than five times what they spent in 2002, when travel fell sharply after the September 2001 terrorist attacks.

Every increase in the price of fuel raises the pressure on the carriers, which pump about 26,500 litres into a Boeing 737 and as much as 227,000 litres into bigger 747s.

Airlines are raising fares and adding surcharges and fees as fast as they can, but past a certain point, passengers stay home. That's why the carriers are looking for any new savings they can find.

Although airlines have tried fuel-saving measures for years, they attacked the problem with renewed urgency when oil passed US\$100 a barrel this year. Now, all airlines are urging employees to suggest ways to cut fuel use.

Carriers save the most by parking aging aircraft, of course, and



CLEAN ENGINES: Airlines are washing jet engines more often to cut drag caused by dirt and debris to save millions in fuel costs. (PHOTO: NYT)

many are already doing so. Northwest is retiring DC-9 jets it has used for decades; American is grounding some of its MD-80s, while United is parking six 747s.

But even specks of dirt are considered culprits. American and Southwest are washing a handful of jet engines each night, a process that used to happen only during thorough maintenance overhauls. Southwest figures it has already saved US\$1.6 million in fuel costs since April by reducing the drag caused by dirt and debris.

A number of airlines are flying their planes somewhat slower in order to save fuel - 480mph (772kmh), for example, instead of the usual cruising speed of 500 mph.

Up in the cockpit, Delta is studying whether it is feasible to divide the heavy pilot manuals required on each flight between the captain

and first officer, so pilots are not toting duplicate sets of five or six books that each weigh about 1.5 pounds (0.68kg).

Eventually, the airline wants to eliminate printed manuals and display the information on computer screens, a step the government would have to approve.

Passengers may notice other changes: Lighter passenger seats and drinks carts.

Water is another target. Northwest is putting 25 per cent less water for washroom taps and toilets on its international flights. "Every 25 pounds we remove, we save US\$440,000 a year," said Mr Tim McGraw, Northwest's director of corporate environmental and safety programmes.

Northwest also provides customers with packing tips and serves drinks from two-litre plastic bottles rather than individual cans.

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