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Regional jets crowd skies, squeeze fliers

By Bill McGee, special for USA TODAY

Updated 14h 40m ago

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Of all the changes that have overtaken the airline industry in recent years, one of the most dramatic has been the rapid transition to regional carriers, as "mainline" airlines outsource more and more flying to their regional "partners." You may be surprised to learn that 53 percent of all commercial airline departures in the [United States](#) today are operated by regional airlines.



Behind the Screen

By [Bill McGee](#)

Confusion persists

The number of passengers carried by [U.S.](#) regional airlines nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010, reaching 159 million at the end of the decade. Despite a slight downturn recently, the [Federal Aviation Administration](#) [predicts](#) passenger enplanements on regionals will rise by 3.5 percent through 2031.

PHOTOS: [Regional aircraft in service](#)

Regional service grew as the airline industry's hub-and-spoke model expanded, with smaller commuter carriers operating on "thin" routes, often to small and rural communities. In fact, regional airlines provide the only air service at 484 airports nationwide. But today, regional aircraft also operate on some of the nation's densest routes and clog some of the most congested airports.

At the U.S. Department of Transportation's [Future of Aviation Advisory Committee](#) meetings in 2010, I raised the issue of booking transparency. That's because I hear constantly from readers who are confused over which airline they've booked, and many don't realize when

AFP/Getty Images

Regional airlines provide the only air service at 484 airports nationwide, but regional aircraft operate on some of the nation's densest routes, too.

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Regional aircraft

Here are some common regional aircraft operating on domestic routes for major carriers including American, Delta, United and US Airways, with approximate passenger capacities:

ATR 72, seats 64-66

Bombardier/Canadair CRJ 200, seats 50

Bombardier/Canadair CRJ 700, seats 67-70

Bombardier/Canadair CRJ 900, seats 79

Bombardier Q Series, seats 5-30

deHavilland Dash-8, seats 37-50

Embraer 120, seats 9

Embraer 135, seats 37

Embraer 140, seats 44

Embraer 145, seats 50

Embraer 145, seats 50

Embraer 170, seats 69

Embraer 175, seats 80

Saab 340, seats 34

they're buying tickets on the majors' partners and not on the majors. Last year the DOT responded by [tightening rules that provide transparency for code-sharing flights](#), particularly with regional affiliates.

MCGEE: What I learned serving on the government's 'Future of Aviation' panel

Unfortunately, as regional flights become more ubiquitous, consumer confusion increases. Every day, tens of thousands of passengers book flights branded by major airlines but operated by regional partners. And even seasoned travelers are sometimes surprised by the differences.

Far from seamless

Major airlines insist there are no significant disparities when passengers fly on regional rather than mainline aircraft. But a brief rundown of some of the most pressing issues casts some doubt on such claims:

•**Safety.** In recent years the U.S. airline industry has posted a strong safety record. But while the industry notes there hasn't been a fatal "major" airline accident since 2001, there have been five fatal crashes of regional carriers operating on behalf of five different majors since then, resulting in 135 deaths:

•2003: [Air Midwest](#) doing business as (dba) US Airways Express

•2004: Pinnacle Airlines dba Northwest Airlin

•2004: Corporate Airlines dba AmericanConnection

•2006: Comair dba Delta Connection

•2009: [Colgan Air](#) dba Continental Connection

In the wake of the Colgan Air accident near Buffalo, the Airline Safety Act was passed to strengthen pilot hiring and training standards for regionals and to provide one level of safety among mainline carriers and regional partners. Yet a recent Senate hearing underscored that problems remain, with the [Inspector General of the DOT testifying](#) that the FAA "has not met timelines for raising pilot training standards, implementing mentoring

programs, providing enhanced leadership skills to captains and increasing minimum pilot qualifications."

•**Service/Comfort.** Cabins are smaller on regional jets than on larger aircraft, and so are the seats. Also, many regional jets don't offer adequate overhead bins, galleys or premium seating. Some smaller planes are not even jetbridge-compatible, necessitating outdoor boarding and deplaning. When business or first classes are provided, often they don't consist of considerably larger seats, hot meals or any number of entertainment products offered by the same airlines on larger planes. What's more, access for the handicapped and compatibility of child-restraint systems can be much more difficult.

•**Reliability.** According to the [DOT's most recent annual rankings](#), regionals were dead last among the 16 domestic carriers rated for mishandled baggage, and dead last with the most canceled flights. Several regionals also ranked at the bottom for involuntarily bumping passengers. Furthermore, making sense of the DOT's monthly Air Travel [Consumer Reports](#) can be difficult because regional operators are broken out separately from the mainline airline partners they represent. This can be particularly confusing because a mainline airline can contract with as many as eight different regionals, while a

single regional carrier can contract with multiple mainlines; therefore their service rankings are a muddled mess.

•**Environment.** As I learned while researching this topic, examining commercial aviation's carbon footprint is a complex undertaking. But while we all await further technological advancements, the most controllable way to reduce the nation's airborne pollutants is the controversial solution of reexamining how airlines schedule their aircraft. For example, the [Regional Airline Association](#) notes that every morning regionals operate 30 of the 35 nonstop departures between Washington and [New York](#), hardly a "thin" route between small markets. Clogging gates, taxiways, runways, and airways with smaller airplanes rather than consolidating such flights with larger aircraft is a big-picture problem that has been left to the airline industry to address—ineffectively. An even more sensible solution is to reexamine where and when alternative transportation modes such as rail should be considered.

Buyer beware

The best advice when you book ANY flight through ANY booking channel—online or offline, through an airline or through a third-party ticket seller—is to ensure you're clear on which carrier is actually operating the flight. If you have doubts, don't book until you're satisfied.

MORE: [Read previous columns](#)

[Bill McGee](#), a contributing editor to Consumer Reports and the former editor of Consumer Reports Travel Letter, is an FAA-licensed aircraft dispatcher who worked in airline operations and management for several years. Tell him what you think of his latest column by sending him an e-mail at travel@usatoday.com. Include your name, hometown and daytime phone number, and he may use your feedback in a future column.

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Kasey Deagle · Top Commenter

I'm probably preaching to the choir here but.....

Having worked for AMR for a decade (left in 2002), the rule of thumb for consumers is that, when you book a flight on any major if there is a segment in your itinerary with a flight number of 4000 or above it is a

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