

Del Norte's regional airport expects rough skies during pandemic

April 7, 2020



As the airline industry continues to feel the financial squeeze of less travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Del Norte County Regional Airport and the Brookings Airport have so far avoided the economic crunch.

The Del Norte County Regional Airport finds itself in a fairly unique situation operationally.

Randy Hooper, Del Norte County Airport Director, said this is because the airport receives a federal subsidy through the Department of Transportation's (DOT) Alternate Essential Air Service (AEAS) program. The program guarantees service in rural locations through a contract with specific carriers.

"A lot of the larger airports don't have an essential air service agreement, so there are a lot more, bigger questions for them," Hooper said.

However, many questions remain for Del Norte's airport, as the grant under the AEAS program was in the process of being renewed by Sept. 30. An online survey last month sought public input on priorities for

continued and future service at Jack McNamara Field. Hooper said the initial date to send those community comments back to the DOT was April 14. But because of complications and health concerns over the coronavirus, that's been pushed out to May 14.

The airport currently has a contract with Contour Airlines to provide flights in and out of Oakland. But Hooper said it's out of his hands whether the federal government decides to continue its contract with Contour or go with another carrier.

"Either way, we expect an orderly transition, whether it's another round with Contour, or through a selection of a new carrier," Hooper said. "The government would be giving them time set up operations, so they could be up and running Oct. 1. But with the coronavirus complications, it's a moving goal post. But I think we're still on track."

For now, Hooper said to not expect any disruption in service, as aviation is a sub-sector of transportation, which is considered a "critical infrastructure sector" by the federal government. Thus, the airport is required to remain open during emergencies such as this. However, he urges those who do not need to travel at this time to not do so.

With fewer flights, Hooper expects the regional airport can stay operational with fixed tenant contracts with Cal-Ore Life Flight and Federal Express and additional landing fees coming in through UPS.

However, Contour is experiencing a rough go during these times. Hooper said in February, Contour's operations were down to 80% from normal. Today, that's down to 10%. He explained they still provide flights out of Crescent City at 7 a.m. and return flights at 7 p.m.

"What they did previously is after Oakland, the same plane would continue on to Santa Barbara and then on to Las Vegas and turn around for the return trips. But because of the drop in demand, the second leg has suspended because Contour doesn't get a subsidy for that leg of the flight," Hooper said.

To compound Contour's financial losses, its headquarters were severely damaged during the tornados in Tennessee March 2 and 3.

"The tornados destroyed their home base of operations, so their losses were already in the of tens of millions before the drop of traffic," Hooper said. "They're going through tough times for sure."

Hooper isn't sure either what the times ahead will be for Del Norte's airport. Its peak season is June, July and August. He said while other regions are expected to have reached their peak exposure to the coronavirus by then, there's no guarantee when that will be here.

"The coronavirus seems to be geographic. So, we'll reach a different peak in our neck of the woods. Public health people keep saying that's further out. But God forbid we be in a position that happens during our summer peak in Del Norte. That could obviously influence continuation with service," Hooper said.

In the meantime, Hooper said to check in with the airport's website, www.flycrescentcity.com, for updates and guidelines to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus, especially by eliminating all but essential travel

plans.

Meanwhile the Brookings Airport, as a small municipal airport, does not rely on commercial traffic to remain operational.

“We do get a lot of calls asking how do I get a flight into Brookings,” said Jay Trost, Brookings Deputy Director of Public Works and Development Services. “I tell them, no, you want to fly into Crescent City.”

Trost said Brookings does not get a lot of traffic overall, other than Ameriflight delivering UPS packages, Cal-Ore Reach delivering air medical service and local aircraft owners. Trost said the Brookings Airport has not felt the effects of coronavirus restrictions yet.

“Operations have been business as usual. We have taken some precautions at the fuel farm, taking sanitation precautions after people are done fueling,” he said.

Trost added that while the airport has seen a large reduction in private use recently, that shouldn’t impact overall operations. He said funding comes out of the city’s general fund and is supplemented through ground leases.

"Not much has changed in our revenue stream," Trost said.