

INTERIORS: Southwest sees green with new carpet squares

By **Mary Kirby** | 16 May 2010

Southwest Airlines has opted to extend its in-flight trial of new lighter-weight, eco-friendly interiors on its “green plane” before deciding whether to deploy the materials across its entire fleet.

The low-cost giant last year began evaluating 100% recycled carpet tiles; two types of seat covers; aluminium instead of plastic passenger seat rub strips; seat-back foam fill; and canvas life vest pouches instead of the current metal containers on a single Boeing 737-700, in a bid to reduce fuel costs and greenhouse gas emissions.

“The test has gone very well. We’re learning a lot along the way. We’ve had terrific partners in this and we look forward to getting all the data in to make a decision,” says Southwest, which launched the trial in late 2009.

Since that time, InterfaceFLOR, which manufactures the recycled carpet squares used in Southwest’s test, has made some improvements to the materials. Southwest “will replace the existing tiles with new tiles”, says Boeing, whose concept centre co-developed the recyclable carpet with InterfaceFLOR. The concept won a Crystal Cabin Award in the ‘greener cabin, health and safety’ category at the Aircraft Interiors Expo in Hamburg in 2008.

The change-out of the carpet tiles on Southwest’s green plane will help the carrier verify the ease of installation, since technicians will be able to simply pull up the current squares and replace them with the new ones.

“Something we are very conscious about through our relationship with InterfaceFLOR is if we could have sections of carpet replaced rather than the entire carpet, would that amount to cost savings for us and what would the environmental implications be in just eliminating the damaged sections,” says Southwest.

This exercise will also help Boeing determine if carpet squares should be offered across its product line. “Going forward this is a product that potentially could be offerable on all commercial aircraft, not just Boeing aircraft,” says the airframer. “Our industry sends a lot of carpet to landfills and this is potentially a great way to turn that around in our push toward sustainability.”

The throw-away rate for carpet is extremely high because of soiling that is typical near doorways, galleys and lavatories, says author and interiors consultant Jennifer Coutts Clay. “It is estimated that about 70% of aircraft carpet is thrown away because of staining and the remaining 30% because the carpet is actually worn out.”

Coutts Clay notes that, at the end of their service life, the InterfaceFLOR carpet tiles “are returned to the manufacturer and completely re-constituted into new carpet via a process that is carbon neutral”.

But carpet tiles are not the only environmentally-sound option on the market. “New stain-proofed nylon carpets, as developed by Mohawk Aviation Carpet, can last approximately six times longer than wool carpet, resulting in fewer new resources being utilized and less carpet consigned to landfills,” says Coutts Clay.

“The proper placement of the carpet’s direction during the installation process (i.e. the warp-weft and forward-aft layout) can greatly help reduce wear-and-tear replacements, thereby providing cost savings for the airlines. Recent recycling programs have routed reconstituted aviation carpet to subsequent domestic and commercial applications.”

Source: Air Transport Intelligence news