

BUSINESS

Global shipping delays are leading to increased demand for Everett-built Boeing freighters

Major shipping delays backing up west coast ports are causing couriers to turn toward the sky to get goods where they need to go.

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Published: 7:02 PM PDT October 27, 2021

Updated: 8:22 PM PDT October 27, 2021



EVERETT, Wash. — Major shipping delays backing up ports across the West Coast and soaring costs of shipping freight by sea are leading to an increased demand for Boeing freighters built in Everett.

Large-bodied passenger planes which would usually carry freight on long-distance flights are also out of commission, as demand for international flying is still struggling to make a comeback during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

"The demand for air freight is still there, so we have more dedicated freighters entering the market to move those goods around the world," said Boeing's Tom Sanderson, who is a director of marketing with a focus on wide-bodied aircraft.

Through September of 2021, airlines ordered 59 Everett built freighters, including 36 777s, 19 767s, and earlier this year, four 747-8 freighters, even though dwindling demand for the passenger version of the Queen of the Skies has led Boeing to prepare to close the 747 assembly line late in 2022.

Additionally, Boeing will convert 80 passenger airplanes into freighters overseas.

What are the kinds of goods now more likely to ship by air?

"It's going to be this kind of stuff that's absolutely critical to keep the economy going," said Michel Merluzeau of Air Insight Research. He said computer chips, processors, critical pumps and components to keep factories here and around the world from shutting down — items that might normally be shipped by sea — are just a few examples of what needs to arrive in a reliable fashion.

"They're going to ship by air," Merluzeau said. "If somebody wants to pay the money for air freight, be my guest."

E-commerce is a global driver of increased shipping demand, Merluzeau said. "People are impatient, they buy something online, they want it now."

While shipping delays won't last forever, Sanderson predicts current shifts in shipping methods may be here to stay.

"Our customers are seeing disruption of other supply chains, so they'd like to insulate themselves against that. And dedicated production freighters like the '67 and the 777 and the conversion freighters like the 737 and the 767 can insulate them against potential disruption in other places," he said.

Sanderson also sees another upside, as the pandemic has forced the retirement of older passenger jets, which has freed them up to enter the freighter conversion programs, meaning airlines are more likely to replace those planes with newer more efficient ones that he hopes will also come from Everett.

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