



Ka-band connectivity in the fray as Aerosat reveals upgrade path

BY MARY KIRBY

Aerosat plans to make its Ku-band antenna system upgradeable to support Ka-band satellite-based in-flight connectivity, as industry interest grows for cost-efficient Ka-band solutions.

The company, which played an instrumental role in supporting both Alaska Airlines and Southwest Airlines' in-flight trials of Row 44's Ku-band-based high-speed Internet, is currently working "to make the antenna upgradeable from Ku to Ka", Aerosat vice-president of business development Bill McNary tells ATI and Flightglobal.

"We obviously have multiple proposals out there to a variety of customers," he adds.

Ka is generating heightened industry attention, as it promises a lower cost per bit than Ku or L-band solutions and requires a less complex antenna than Ku, since no polarization steering is required, EMS Technologies vice-president of strategy and innovation Gary Hebb noted at a recent World Airline Entertainment Association (WAEA) single focus workshop on connectivity. The WAEA has since rebranded as the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX).

At present, there are some technical and geographical limitations to Ka, and it is mostly viewed as a land-based solution for the near-term. But Aerosat "will be ready when the market is ready", says McNary.

"I would say that the trend in interest in Ka is up. You'd have to be [living] under a rock to not recognize that. The conversation about Ka continues. There are a number of carriers that are comfortable that they can do Ku now, and they are interested in an upgrade path [to Ka]," says McNary.

Aerosat has been making Ku-band antennas for the last decade. It has a core base of business customers, and logged many thousands more flight hours during the Alaska and Southwest trials.

Aerosat ultimately did not win a contract to supply Ku-band antennas for Southwest's entire fleet. The deal was awarded to Tecom instead. "It had to do with commercial terms", says McNary, declining further comment.

However, he assures that Aerosat's "core base of business has been sufficient to sustain us".

Aerosat also remains very confident it will win commercial business for its Ku-band antenna. A number of active discussions are presently underway, says McNary.