

CMA CGM Air Cargo enters key trans-Pacific market amid e-commerce boom



CMA CGM Air Cargo will be the launch customer for the Airbus 350 freighter. Photo credit: CMA CGM.

Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Apr 16, 2024, 10:50 AM EDT

CMA CGM Air Cargo announced the launch of its own Asia-North America service Tuesday just three months after regulatory issues saw plans to enter the US market scrapped along with its joint venture with Air France-KLM.

With the Asia-Europe trade served out of Paris by 12 freighter flights a week, the addition of trans-Pacific services will fill a crucial gap in the carrier's global network coverage.

“Our expansion into the trans-Pacific lane marks a turning point in the company's history by connecting a new continent to our network and aligns with the ambition of

the CMA CGM Group to offer a range of solutions to its customers,” Damien Mazaudier, CEO of CMA CGM Air Cargo, said in a statement.

Service will be provided by two Boeing 777-200 freighters operated by Atlas Air, the first of which will be delivered in June and the second in the fourth quarter, with both in place in preparation for this year’s expected robust peak season.

The first B777-200F will serve Hong Kong, Chicago and Seoul and the second will connect China to North America. A third B777-200F will join the fleet in the first quarter of 2025, but CMA CGM did not disclose which trade lane it will serve.

The 10-year air cargo joint venture between CMA CGM and Air France-KLM agreed to last year became caught up in an airport slot dispute between the US and the Dutch governments that would see US airlines losing 300 slots at Amsterdam Schiphol airport. With the joint venture not receiving the requisite regulatory approvals to operate in the US market, CMA CGM decided to withdraw from the agreement effective March 31.

But North America is a key market in a global network, and CMA CGM Air Cargo lost little time in going in alone.

Capitalizing on e-commerce demand

Expanding into the Asia-North America trade lane also allows CMA CGM Air Cargo to have its capacity in position for peak season and to capitalize on strong and sustained US import demand of e-commerce products from China. The e-commerce demand is being pushed by Chinese online marketplaces benefiting from the US’ generous de minimis threshold value of \$800 under which goods are exempt from customs duties and taxes.

CMA CGM Air Cargo’s airline fleet currently consists of two B777 freighters that run five flights per week from Paris to Hong Kong and four per week to Shanghai, in addition to three Airbus 330 freighters. One of the A330 freighters operates between Paris, Mumbai and Guangzhou three times a week while the other two are chartered out. All the aircraft are based at the airline’s Paris-Charles de Gaulle hub.

The three-year-old airline’s expansion will be further accelerated when it becomes the launch customer for Airbus’ new A350 freighter, which Mazaudier described as “the most environmentally efficient aircraft on the market.” The eight aircraft will be delivered in 2026 and 2027.

The move into the trans-Pacific by CMA CGM follows similar expansion by the air cargo divisions of rivals Maersk and Mediterranean Shipping Co. As part of Maersk’s

takeover of air freight forwarder Senator International, the carrier significantly expanded its coverage of North and South America.

MSC Air Cargo operates trans-Pacific routes from Hong Kong, Xiamen and South Korea to Dallas, Chicago and Mexico.

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