

Maersk launches Chicago Rockford-China air cargo service

Ocean carrier adjusts North American routes to help scale up airline in North America

 Eric Kulisch • Monday, June 17, 2024



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Key Takeaways:



The cargo airline owned by shipping titan Maersk is pausing freighter service between one Chinese city and South Carolina so the aircraft can be reallocated to launch scheduled service between another city in China and its hub near Chicago, as customer demand shifts, FreightWaves has learned.

The company temporarily suspended flights from Shenyang, China, to Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport (GSP), via Seoul, South Korea, on June 1 and will deploy the dedicated Boeing 767-300 freighter to inaugurate a new route connecting Chicago-Rockford International Airport (RFD) with Zhengzhou, China, said Kevin Doell, Maersk’s media relations manager for North America.

The new service begins Monday and will be available three times per week, with a refueling stop in Anchorage, Alaska.

Maersk Air Cargo’s evolution toward a midmarket scheduled cargo carrier will take another step through the introduction of the company’s first-ever Boeing 777 freighter in the third quarter, in time for the busy cross-border shipping season. Officials previously confided that the two 777s on order from Boeing will be flown by the company’s own pilots and based in Billund, Denmark. Doell told FreightWaves the first aircraft will initially be deployed on China-Europe routes.

The Denmark-based company entered the U.S. air cargo market in October 2022 as part of a strategy to evolve into an integrated, multimodal logistics service provider and has since expanded to nine flights per week. Maersk owns the Boeing 767 aircraft but outsources their operation to Miami-based Amerijet International. Six of the flights move between Rockford, Illinois, and Hangzhou, China, on the central China coast near Shanghai, with stops each way at Seoul’s Incheon airport.

Shenyang-GSP flights, which operated three times per week before being shifted to RFD, are expected to resume in August when Maersk presumably plans to deploy another aircraft for the Rockford-Zhengzhou service and return the 767 to its original rotation, according to RFD and Maersk officials. Amerijet will continue to operate the 767s during the interim period, but Maersk has previously said it will use its own pilots to fly two 777s it ordered from Boeing.

“In consultation with its customers, Maersk Own Controlled Flight Operations has determined that the temporary cessation of service on the Shenyang-Incheon route will create minor disruption during the traditional summer low season and afford Maersk the opportunity to increase its network footprint in advance of new aircraft deliveries and inductions slated for later this summer,” Maersk said in a statement to FreightWaves. The short pause in the Greenville-Shenyang service “will have very limited impact to customers during the summer season,” the company added in a June 5 market update on its website.

During the interim period, Maersk will be able to feed cargo through RFD or use commercial capacity on other carriers to alternative airports to meet the needs of importers and exporters that rely on GSP.

It’s not clear what aircraft Maersk has available to backfill the RFD-CGO route after the GSP-Shenyang service is restored. One possibility would be to contract airlift with one of its charter partners. Doell said Maersk is still weighing its options for replacing the 767 when it is returned to the Greenville-Spartanburg hub.

Maersk for many years operated an airline called Star Air as an outsourced provider of airlift for UPS and other express couriers in Europe. Using huge ocean profits, it branched out and expanded its fleet in 2022 to provide direct air cargo service to its own customers as part of a strategic move to become an integrated logistics provider.

Executives have set a goal of carrying about one-third of the company’s annual air tonnage within its own controlled freight network through a combination of owned and leased aircraft. The remaining capacity will be provided by commercial carriers and charter flight operators.

Building North America network

Maersk Air Cargo subleases 60,000-square-foot in a cargo building at RFD, which came with its 2022 acquisition of German forwarder Senator International. The airport has grown in popularity this decade as an efficient alternative to crowded international gateways that focus on passenger traffic. RFD officials like to note that airlines can save nearly an hour of operating time — 25 minutes or more in taxiing each direction — at Rockford compared to a large airport like Chicago O’Hare. The difference in carbon dioxide emissions for a single inbound or outbound movement for a 747-400 can be 20 tons, officials said.

Maersk in April opened a 90,000-square-foot airfreight warehouse near Miami International Airport as a way to transship cargo between Asia and Latin America, with most shipments being trucked from RFD and GSP for consolidation and placement on other airlines. Maersk also has airfreight stations near the Atlanta, Los Angeles and Chicago O’Hare airports.

Maersk Air Cargo continues to maintain a presence at GSP. In addition to operating its own aircraft, Maersk Air Cargo’s freight forwarding business controls several freighters through long-term charter agreements with third-party operators. Magma Aviation currently operates a Boeing 747-400 cargo jet four times per week between Hahn, Germany, and GSP and two times weekly to RFD on Maersk’s behalf.

Maersk’s decision to bring more freighter capacity to Rockford is likely influenced by e-commerce demand in a Midwest market with 17 million consumers and the potential inventory pull from massive distribution centers being built for Walmart and automaker Stellantis.

Walmart last year announced plans to build a 1.2 million square-foot perishable distribution center in Belvidere, Illinois, about 12 miles east of Rockford. The facility, scheduled to open in 2027, will deliver fresh and frozen foods to stores in the region.

Meanwhile, Stellantis committed last fall to invest \$100 million in a mega parts distribution center located in Belvidere.

FreightWaves recently reported that Maersk expects to have two factory-built 777 freighters in service in time for the peak shipping season after being delivered by Boeing. The airline currently operates 21 Boeing 767-200 and 767-300 freighters, the majority of which were converted for cargo after functioning as passenger aircraft.