

UNITED AIRLINES TAKES OFF WITH BIOFUEL

News / Airlines



A Boeing 737 jet that took off from Los Angeles International Airport on Friday morning looked like most other planes launching into the partly cloudy skies.

But this San Francisco-bound United Airlines flight was preceded by speeches and fanfare because the plane's engines were powered by a blend of petroleum-based fuel and sustainable biofuel, brewed at a Southern California refinery from natural oils and agricultural waste.

Other airlines have tested biofuel, but the Chicago-based carrier says no other airline has committed to using the fuel on a regular route. The jet flies the LA-SF L.A.-San Francisco route four to five times a day, and it will be fueled by a blend of 30% biofuel and 70% petroleum fuel for two weeks. The airline also plans to continue using the biofuel in its regular operations at the airport.

“This is definitely a milestone,” said Angela Foster-Rice, United’s managing director of environmental affairs and sustainability.

Still, experts say that the industry is years away from closing the tap on petroleum-based jet fuel.

“We are very, very far from meeting the global transportation needs with biofuels because so much fuel is consumed,” said Deepak Rajagopal, a biofuel policy expert with the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability.

United Airlines, which burned more than 3.2 billion gallons of jet fuel last year, has agreed to buy up to as much as 15 million gallons of sustainable biofuel over the next three years from AltAir Paramount’s refinery in Paramount.

The biofuel blend cuts carbon emissions by more than 60% compared to with traditional jet fuel, according to United said.

Foster-Rice acknowledged that United’s purchase is a tiny share of all the fuel burned by the airline annually.

“You need to start somewhere,” she said.

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