AIRBUS EXPECTS GLOBAL FREIGHTER FLEET TO NEARLY DOUBLE BY 2045

News / Manufacturer

Airbus 2026 Cargo Global Market Forecast, unveiled at the Cargo Facts Symposium, predicts that the global fleet of dedicated freighter aircraft will expand by 46%, rising from 2,360 aircraft in 2026 to 3,460 by 2045. The forecast identifies demand for 2,670 freighters over the period, driven primarily by the replacement of aging aircraft (1,580 units) and fleet growth requirements (1,090 units).

Of the projected 2,670 deliveries, Airbus expects demand for 1,140 single-aisle freighters, 860 mid-size widebody freighters, and 670 large widebody aircraft. The manufacturer anticipates that 970 of these aircraft will be newly built, while 1,700 will result from passenger-to-freighter conversions.

Supported by a projected 2.9% compound annual growth rate in global trade, air cargo traffic is expected to increase by 3.2% annually over the next two decades. Airbus notes that the sector has remained highly resilient despite elevated fuel costs, geopolitical uncertainty, and continuing supply chain challenges.

Although air freight represents less than 1% of global trade by weight, it accounts for more than

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30% of trade value, underlining its importance for time-sensitive and high-value shipments. Over the past three years, the value share of computers and high-technology goods transported by air has doubled, reaching 15% in 2026. Continued expansion of e-commerce and the growing use of air freight as an alternative to maritime transport are also expected to support demand.

Asia-Pacific is forecast to remain the largest international air cargo market, with traffic between the region and North America expected to generate the strongest growth at 3.8% annually, followed by Europe. Airbus highlights that these long-haul routes are ideally suited to the capabilities of its next-generation A350F freighter.

Regionally, North America and Asia-Pacific will account for the largest share of the anticipated 2,670 freighter deliveries, with demand for 925 and 850 aircraft respectively, representing around two-thirds of the global total. Europe and the CIS are expected to require 515 freighters, followed by Latin America (165), the Middle East (125), and Africa (90).

Airbus also expects a significant wave of retirements among older-generation freighters over the next 20 years, creating demand for more fuel-efficient replacement aircraft. This transition will include new-production platforms such as the A350F, alongside passenger-to-freighter conversion programs for the A320, A321, and A330 families, enabling operators to reduce fuel burn and lower carbon emissions.

22 OCTOBER 2026

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