

THE ROCKFORD FILES



Chicago-Rockford International airport, the fastest growing airport in the over 250,000 tonne category, has designs on the lucrative e-commerce market, reports Roger Hailey

Chicago-Rockford International airport (RFD) has big ambitions to be the e-commerce hub of choice for the US Midwest, with both UPS and Amazon Air among its major customers.

RFD, already a designated diversion airport for neighbouring giant Chicago O'Hare, was named as 2018's fastest-growing airport in the over 250,000 tonnes category by Airports Council International.

The US airport saw a 56.6% increase in volumes handled, to 306,332 tonnes in 2018, more than twice the percentage increase of European hub Liege, although the freighter-friendly Belgian airport was starting from a higher base, at 872,000 tonnes handled last year.

RFD director of business development and cargo Ken Ryan tells *Freighters World* that he expects to see "significant" growth this year "but

not in the 50% or 60% range", citing Amazon's investment in a new sort system for its 200,000 sq ft facility.

While current volume growth in tonnes handled were not available for 2019, Ryan says that the growth trend in aircraft-landed weight was more than 12% compared with last year, the increase expected to be between 10% to 15% by the end of December.

UPS has around 30 flights a day at RFD, while Amazon Air has around 10 at present. The range of freighter types is diverse, with calls from B737-800Fs, B757-200Fs, A300Fs, B767-200Fs and -300Fs, MD-11Fs and B747-400Fs.

Adds Ryan: "It is hard for us to judge the growth this year for several reasons; for example UPS made a big investment in upgrading its sort centre at Chicago and I believe it can handle in the range of 150,000 packages per hour.

"In terms of landed weight, we are 112m lbs (51,000 tonnes) above what we were last year [end of September]."

Negotiations with unnamed cargo airlines, including those based in China, are taking place and the RFD cargo boss expects that one or two carriers should come through during the next nine months.

The airport is preparing for future growth with a first phase \$10m investment in additional

aircraft ramp space, with a final phase total of \$30m, on top of \$35m invested in airport facilities since the beginning of 2018.

A large tranche of the ramp investment is government funding from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

That is partly because of RFD's diversionary airport role; it is just 58 miles from O'Hare, which means passenger jets can stay up in the air for longer rather than switch to an airport further away.

The ramp investment also has practical day-to-day benefits for freighter operators at RFD in what is a competitive local market.

Chicago O'Hare, which handled 1.9m tonnes of cargo in 2018, a 5% increase on prior year, has invested \$220m in its Northeast Cargo Development, a project that has produced a surge in airfreight activity.

FLUID DESIGN

But Rockford is not daunted and plays its niche-and-nimble hand to the full. Airport management is committed to building a 130,000 sq ft modular-design cargo building, meaning it can be built in sections subject to market demand, when and not if it comes.

Ryan adds: "O'Hare is very typical of what is going on at the major US hub airports where you can do a lot inside of the [airport] fence, but the more trucks you have going to pick up or drop off freight can result in tremendous backlogs and delays, which is one of our selling points.

"All those factors combined [at O'Hare] can mean delays of between four to six hours. We do not have that problem either in the air or the ground, admittedly we don't have the same volumes, but then that means you can get your freight into the Rockford facility five hours faster than at O'Hare."

Ryan adds that RFD can be more agile than the larger hubs.



Amazon ULDs at RFD

He states that when the first call came in from ABX for the Amazon Air freighters, he was empowered to make a deal, avoiding internal airport bureaucracy, that would see Rockford as the favoured Midwest hub, rather than O'Hare or Milwaukee.

"In under 40 days we had our first ABX flight and that included helping the chosen handling agent bring its equipment to Rockford, plus providing offices for them to interview 100 people who we then trained in 30 days.

"We moved and did things as if we had a signature. I don't think anybody reacted as quickly as we did in the region." ♦



'You can get your freight into the Rockford facility five hours faster than at O'Hare'
Ken Ryan,
Chicago-Rockford International