

AVIATION

Nok Air logs on to WiFi before rivals

BOONSONG KOSITCHOTETHANA

Nok Air is leading the Thai airline industry in offering free in-flight broadband connectivity for passengers.

The budget carrier's board last week endorsed an investment plan to equip its 18-strong fleet of B737-800s with satellite-based WiFi systems.

Nok Air's first internet-enabled aircraft is due to be connected in March and all its aircraft will have WiFi in two years' time, chief executive Patee Sarasin told the *Bangkok Post*.

The service is a collaboration with Thaicom Plc, the SET-listed satellite communications provider, and Global Eagle Entertainment Inc (GEE), a US-based provider of satellite-based in-flight WiFi and device-based entertainment.

Details of the deal were not disclosed but an industry estimate put the outlay for installing the system on each Nok Air jet at 14 million baht.

The WiFi launch has been made possible by affordable service costs imposed by Thaicom and GEE, said Mr Patee.

He said Nok Air decided to make the service complimentary to increase the



Nok Air's B737-800 jets will soon have free in-flight broadband services. BOONSONG KOSITCHOTETHANA

appeal to passengers, particularly the new generation who insist on connectivity.

Mr Patee said the introduction of in-flight WiFi is consistent with the airline's drive to be innovative, as it has already offered free broadband connection at airport boarding gates.

Discount carriers usually charge for extra services.

Mr Patee said connection quality will meet users' expectations and the service will be initially available on domestic flights, which constitute the bulk of Nok Air's operations.

The airline is stealing the limelight from arch rival Thai AirAsia (TAA), which has been working on a similar initiative for some time.

TAA chief executive Tassapon Bijleveld said last month that it has been outfitting its fleet of Airbus 320 jetliners with satellite-based WiFi that could come online next year, depending on resolving sticky issues involving state regulations and regulatory processes.

A Thaicom executive yesterday said company is still clearing the licence issue for Nok Air's system and working on the best technical solution for the airline.

But Thaicom expects Nok Air's system to go online by the end of the first quarter or the early part of second quarter.

In-flight broadband plans have been bogged down by the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission, which insists there can be no spectrum for aircraft without an auction.

Thaicom has a 30-year domestic communication satellite operating agreement with the Information and Communication Technology Ministry.

Thaicom is using its existing resources to serve Nok Air.