

Nok Air to offer free in-flight Wi-Fi service

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THE NATION

NOK AIR has announced plans to become the first airline in Asia to offer free high-speed in-flight Wi-Fi, aimed at appealing to younger customers and helping it reach its target of 8 million passengers this year.

Chief executive officer Patee Sarasin said its on-board high-speed Internet was just one of the initiatives Nok Air planned to add to its flights operating in Thailand and overseas. A few other Asian airlines have on-board Internet, but not the high-speed system Nok Air will use.

The system will be provided by Thaicom, using the Ku-band that is capable of delivering third-generation service at a cruising height of 10,700 metres.

The new service will be available starting next month on Nok Bussarakam, the airline's latest Boeing 737-800 Next Generation with capacity of 189 seats, which is now operating from Bangkok to Phuket and Udon Thani.

Nok Air plans to install Wi-Fi in six aircraft over the next six months. Patee said the new service was expected to draw a lot more passengers, especially younger people and those who are heavy social-media users.

Although the airline is now running an average load factor of 90 per

cent, it suffered a lot in the second quarter during the political crisis.

"Last year was a great year for us, but it got worse in 2014. However, we continue adding more services to capture the market in this tough time," Patee said.

Nok Air is confident of achieving its passenger target of 8 million this year, up from 6 million in 2013. However, net profit is expected to fall from more than Bt1 billion last year to between Bt300 million and Bt400 million because of tough competition. Nok Air has ordered 15 new aircraft, two of which are scheduled to arrive next year.

Suphajee Suthumpun, chief executive officer of Thaicom and chairman of its executive committee, said about 3,000 aircraft worldwide had been equipped with Wi-Fi systems. Of that total, 1,720 are operating in the United States and Canada, 200 in Europe, and 80 in Asia. One-third of the total, 1,000 planes, are equipped with high-speed Internet or new-generation broadband.

She said the demand for aircraft with high-speed Wi-Fi in Asia should increase the number of planes so equipped to 3,000 within 10 years.

Should anyone worry about air safety and security being compromised by in-flight Wi-Fi, Suphajee said it would not affect aircraft navigation systems because they operated on difference frequencies.