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Retired planes park in desert

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OLD jets come to Marana in Arizona, the United States, with empty engine pods shrink-wrapped in white and tall red tails fading to pink in the desert sun. More will come soon. Some will never fly again.

Airlines have announced plans over the past year to take 1,700 planes out of service as fewer people fly. United Airlines is retiring all 94 of its Boeing 737s by the end of this year, and Northwest Airlines has cut its old DC-9 fleet by about a third.

The number of planes in storage has jumped 29 percent in the past year to 2,302, according to aerospace data firm Ascend Worldwide. That includes 930 parked by US operators alone.

Eventually, some will be sold, some scrapped, some will sit at desert facilities in southern California, Arizona, and New Mexico. But at the moment, their number is growing faster than expected. The banking crisis has made it difficult to get loans to buy aircraft, and the drop in commodity prices has gutted their scrap value.

Travel demand

That makes for busy times at facilities like Evergreen Maintenance Center near Marana. Its super-sized hangar fits a 747, and there are plenty of active planes on hand, including one 747 used to test Pratt & Whitney engines and another converted to fight forest fires.

But outside there's a ghost fleet of 204 parked planes. Some of Northwest's retired 747s are here. Planes from defunct ATA Airlines, 767s from Air Sahara and MaxJet, and a hodgepodge of other airlines from around the world are here, too.

The people who run these facilities chafe at the idea that they're ground keepers in a graveyard. While Evergreen scraps roughly 15 planes a year, most of the stored planes still get checks, extensive record-keeping and federally mandated maintenance that will let them return to service if travel demand and the price of jet fuel cooperate in the future. Storing a 747 with the required maintenance checks costs US\$60,000 a year at Evergreen, half that for a smaller jet.

Steve Coffaro, vice president of marketing and sales at Evergreen, points all this out with pride as he drives around the airfield here, focusing on the company's ability to return these planes to the air safely. Out the left window: Planes that could fly again. Out the right: The scrap area, with the lower half of a fuselage standing upright, 20 or so rows of seats exposed, tray tables dangling open.

The deserts in the US southwest have become one of the top destinations for airliner storage because of the perfect combination of cheap land as far as the eye can see and a dry climate that preserves the planes. Planes deteriorate quickly in high humidity.

While the airline downturn is bringing some relatively new planes to the desert, most are old workhorses.

At Southern California Aviation's facility in Victorville, California, the influx of planes surprised President Jeff A. Lynn. As recently as August he had about 60 airplanes. He expects as many as 240 by the summer.

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