

A340 gets a freighter lift

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IN NATURE, evolution fills an ecological niche if that niche can sustain it – and a similar principle applies to freighter conversions.

LCF Conversions believes it has spotted a gap in the market with a revolutionary twist which keeps costs down.

At a feedstock value of US\$9-14m, the company reckons a 1999 model A340-300 is the optimum candidate to be converted for \$6.5m.

The plan is not to cut large cargo doors into the airframe but, instead, to install ingenious lifts which take ULDs and pallets up within the hold and onto the main deck. Locking beams in the lift maintain the strength of the floor.

The design could be applied to any third-generation medium wide-bodied Airbus or Boeing, which could even be put back to passenger use if required.

Andy Coupland, LCF's performance and economics consultant, says: "There were massive changes in the mid-to-late 1980s at both Airbus and Boeing – they both started using three-dimensional modelling systems, which made the aircraft much more efficient structures than before.

"It is therefore now very difficult to cut a hole in the fuselage. It causes all kinds of problems with the aircraft management system, which you have to sort out."

Coupland instead believes LCF's conversions avoid this headache using two lifts – before and after the wings – corresponding to the doors the aircraft was originally designed with. Each door measures 2.78m x 1.70m and 2.7m x 1.68.

Converted this way, an A340 can carry 4.6 per cent less cargo than an A330-200F according to Coupland.

However, it is the cost of aircraft where LCF thinks it can demonstrate its worth.

Against an LCF A340 conversion is a 12-to-15 per cent higher fuel burn. But in its favour is a range which cannot be matched by other aircraft in its class, as well as lower engine lease costs and lower conversion costs.

For example, engine leasing rates for an A340 have halved in the past year.

LCF says these running costs will only get lower as parts enter the market.

LCF's vision for the conversion could be deemed a success if 10 aircraft are converted, but he is convinced it could be very much more.