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St. Louis, Mo., Airport Lands NASA Study Flights

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Apr. 5--While NASA rovers explore Mars and officials debate the future of space travel, the space agency will make a quiet stop at MidAmerica Airport this summer, not to study space but to study Earth.

NASA's Earth Science division plans to examine global warming and the long-range migration of pollutants, using the airport to launch a passenger plane that has been converted into a research lab.

"It's a good location because -- just like the name says -- it's right in the middle of America," said deputy project manager Kent Shiffer from NASA's Ames Research Center near San Jose, Calif. "It gives us an opportunity to go north, south, anywhere in the country and into Canada."

Some of the details are still in the works, but the plan is to collect samples on long-range flights, looking for greenhouse gases and "aerosols," whether they may be organic smoke from forest fires or inorganic industrial pollution. The idea, as Shiffer explains it, is to determine how much dirty air gets transported from North America to Europe and elsewhere over the Atlantic Ocean and how much comes our way from Asia via the Pacific. Researchers are looking for the kinds of pollutants created from burning fossil fuels that contribute to global warming.

But the gases and aerosols can have subtle effects on climate as well. "The tiny particles in the air can change cloud structure," Shiffer said. "A lot of times, you can see a thunderhead formed by a forest fire."

NASA scientists want to first determine how the atmosphere has changed and then work to discover the consequences of that change. They think they have already observed carbon dioxide that drifts in from over the Pacific Ocean mixing with industrial carbon dioxide from West Coast factories and forming a "carbon sink" over the middle of the country.

"This is a phenomenon that could be related to the summer explosion of plant growth in the United States but has yet to be determined or understood," Shiffer said. About 80 scientists, air crew personnel and managers will arrive July 6 and spend about 10 days flying several nine-hour missions with destinations from Hudson Bay in Canada to the Gulf Coast. A smaller crew will return for a short stint in August.

The flights are coordinated with satellites and balloons that also monitor the atmosphere.

The two-year project also will include flights from a few selected airports on the east and west coasts.

Because NASA is a government agency, its planes can land free at MidAmerica. The airport was built largely with federal money under the stipulation that the government wouldn't be charged for landings. The agency will pay some fees for using the airport's facilities, Shiffer said.

MidAmerica, which is in Mascoutah and next to Scott Air Force Base, was built as a reliever airport for Lambert Field in St. Louis but currently has no regular passenger service.

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