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'Flying laboratory' at airport until Thursday

NASA aircraft taking pollution samples

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At first glance, the airliner seems a little beat up -- some of the windows are missing, replaced with welded metal plates -- but the plane still gleams a pearly white in the sun.

So what's this plane doing at MidAmerica St. Louis Airport?

The modified DC-8, dubbed "the flying laboratory," will be based at MidAmerica until Thursday as part of an international research program led by NASA.

One of the program's main objectives is mapping the way pollutants travel through the atmosphere from region to region. To do so, scientists use the plane to collect air-related data from across the United States.

The plane has pointy-things all over it. "Those are probes," said Jim Gleason, program manager from NASA Headquarters.

"They bring samples of air from the outside in. There are tubes that run from the probes to machines that analyze the sample."

The team was stationed in California before coming to MidAmerica, and, after collecting data here, will move on to New Hampshire.

"Most people think the pollution around St. Louis is produced by the people who live here," Gleason said. "But, as we learn more about it, we see that pollution moves, and usually eastward. We need to figure out where it originates and how it moves to determine how air quality issues become global issues."

During the group's first eight-hour flight from MidAmerica, they flew over St. Louis, parts of Kansas, the Great Lakes and New Orleans. Some of the data collected showed soot from Arizona wildfires has traveled over Kansas, and particles from the Sahara

Desert may travel as far as the Gulf of Mexico.

This is the first NASA air quality mission focused on the United States, however, many different organizations and universities from the United States and Europe are contributing to the study.

In addition to using planes to collect data, satellites, balloons, ships and ground stations are being utilized.

"Rather than one agency doing everything, everyone brings a piece to the table," said Kent Shiffer, project coordinator. "Then everyone gets to share data and we get a much larger picture."

Shiffer and Gleason estimate it may be another year before findings from the project are released to scientific publications.

"This is really a search for knowledge," Gleason said. "We all know about environmental rules and regulations, but after this people will be informed on how to make the right rules and can honestly say, 'You know, you really shouldn't put that out there.'"



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