

Flyht system steps ahead of black box

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CALGARY — The blue box developed by Calgary-based Flyht, and installed in 220 planes worldwide offers a service no other company does - and one that could be useful for carriers that travel outside the range of radar, including the far north and over oceans.

Flyht's Automated Flight Information Reporting System provides a steady stream of data back to a plane's base, including fuel, mechanical, location and altitude data, and can send an emergency message to various entities should that data exceed set parameters. The company, has partnered with Iridium Communications to stream data from planes, via satellite, to the ground.

Flyht has been marketing the \$50,000 box for nine years - originally designed to send faxes from flight - but the discovery in April of the wreckage of Air France 447, which crashed in the Atlantic Ocean in 2009, killing all 228 on board, has ramped up interest in the technology. The 60-employee firm now has orders for 30 of its 228, the model set for release this fall.

Flyht's blue box pulls data from a plane's black box to send to people on the ground, in spurts or constantly, flagging potential problems. Black box information is accessed once a flight lands. An add-on service sends an emergency message triggered by set problems, an option not all clients have taken, said Matt Bradley, vice-president of business development for Flyht, a brand of AeroMechanical Services Ltd.

With Air France flight 447, people would have been alerted hours before normal channels would detect a problem.

The latest version can transmit much more information, including Aircraft Communications Addressing and Reporting System data. "We pick up that data and send that signal through Iridium to the airlines so they have no blanks in coverage. It's a very attractive addition to a fleet," Mr. Bradley said. "In the next five to 10 years it's going to be put on planes by manufacturers," he said.

Peter Goelz, former managing director of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board and now a senior vice-president with O'Neill and Associates, says the biggest benefit is the emergency aspect of the system. "The streaming aspect of the data-recorder information would have enormous value for the aviation industry and for the public," he said, citing the expenses of searching for a plane that goes down. "It's simply going to take some pressure on a few of the national regulators, like the FAA in the United States, or Transport Canada, to push this."