

The Next Thing in Jet Travel  
**FAA Projects Sharp Increase in Use  
Of Business Jets in Next Decade;  
A Plane for Just \$1.5 Million**  
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The use of private business jets will triple over the next decade, driven by the introduction of relatively inexpensive "microjets," the Federal Aviation Administration predicted.

The arrival of these very light jets could make corporate planes affordable to more companies and air-taxi services at smaller airports more viable financially. (The jets cost as little as \$1.5 million, compared with \$2.4 million for the cheapest corporate jets.) All that means more options for fliers. But beleaguered commercial airlines could lose high-paying customers, and airport delays could increase as the sky becomes more crowded.

The first of the new jets, the Eclipse 500, is expected to be certified by the agency after a safety review and is likely to be flying this year. The FAA said Tuesday that it expects these jets to be popular enough to drive up use of privately operated jet aircraft by more than 10% a year over the next 12 years. **By 2017, these twin-engine aircraft are expected to log 9.6 million flight hours, up from an estimated three million last year, the agency added in its annual forecast of aviation activity.**

The agency predicted that there would be 100 very light jets operating by the end of 2006, with the number growing by 400 to 500 aircraft each year after that and reaching nearly 5,000 by 2017. The General Aviation Manufacturers Association's projections are similar; it says the industry is likely to produce between 350 and 500 very light jets a year, with a maximum of perhaps 870.

"If the microjet and air-taxi phenomena are successful, it could mean great new travel choices," says Gerald Bernstein, a partner in the Velocity Group, an aviation consultancy in San Francisco and Washington.

Adam Webster, co-founder and chief executive of rsvpair.com, an air charter directory, agreed. "The jets are still a million dollars a pop," he said.

One cheaper option for both companies and wealthy individuals is fractional jet ownership. At [Berkshire Hathaway](#) Inc.'s NetJets Inc., a leading fractional-ownership company, one-sixteenth of a plane (or 50 hours of yearly flying time) starts at about \$400,000. A recent innovation called fractional jet cards can be had for around \$100,000, but come with a limited number of hours and restrictions on when they can be used.



The Eclipse 500 microjet is expected to be certified by the FAA this year

The new jets may also mean viable air-taxi service. DayJet Corp., based in Delray Beach, Fla., has ordered 309 Eclipse planes and plans to start flying point-to-point service later this year. Chief Executive Ed Iacobucci said the price could be \$1 to \$3 per mile.

The new jets could pose financial challenges for commercial airlines, which are suffering financially. Already, business jets tend to siphon away first-class passengers and those who buy full-fare tickets at the last minute. The FAA said Tuesday that the mainline carriers lost a net \$10.3 billion in 2005, after losing \$6 billion in 2004. Low-cost and regional carriers also lost money -- \$2.5 billion -- in 2005, the FAA said.

Vern Raburn, chief executive of Eclipse Aviation, said planes like the Eclipse 500 are likely to fly into small, underused airports and therefore won't clog the system. The Eclipse needs only 2,200 feet of runway to take off or land, opening up community airports. GAMA, the manufacturers' trade group, says there are about 19,800 landing facilities in the U.S.; commercial airlines, which need much more longer runways, use fewer than 500 of those.

"What excites airports about light jets is that their price and size opens up general aviation to airports that couldn't handle the larger jets," says Barbara Patzner, airport director of Hanscom Field in Bedford, Mass., which has a 5,000-foot runway and a 7,000-foot runway. "If you are an executive and you need to get to Augusta, Maine, you can fly a very light jet and be up there in 20 minutes."

Others think the small jets could worsen delays. Sharon Adcock, who runs a technology consulting firm in Manhattan Beach, Calif., and flies 100,000 miles a year out of the Los Angeles area, has noticed more and more delays over the past few years. "Air traffic has trouble keeping track of just the big boys," she said. "There are an awful lot of little planes and they need to step up the number of air traffic controllers and expand the airports to handle the increased number of planes."