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American Airlines: It's Official

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To no one's surprise, American Airlines announced today that it will begin service at the Regional Airport and six other Carolinas airports this spring and summer.

American, the nation's second-largest airline, said it will begin offering 21 daily round-trip flights at four North Carolina airports April 11. The new flights include three at Regional Airport, 12 at Charlotte, four at Raleigh-Durham Airport and two at Fayetteville.

American also will begin serving the Charleston and Columbia, S.C., airports April 11, with three daily flights each, and will begin serving the Greenville-Spartanburg, S.C., airport with three daily flights July 15.

The service at Regional Airport will include one non-stop flight a day to American's headquarters and hub at Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, and two daily flights to Raleigh-Durham that will continue on to the Dallas-Fort Worth hub.

The addition of American brings to nine the number of airlines serving the Regional Airport, and fills the last vacant gate there. Roger Sekadlo, executive director of the airport, said today. A new ticket counter will be built for American and the airline will use Gate 50.

Other airlines serving the Regional Airport include Piedmont, Eastern United, Delta, Ozark, U.S. Air, People Express and Wheelers.

The entry of American into the Carolinas market, which has been expected for weeks, represents one of the largest service expansions by the airline in recent years, said Dan White, an American spokesman in

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Dallas. Most of the new flights will be to or through the airline's hubs in Chicago and Dallas-Fort Worth, where passengers can make connections to other destinations, White said.

American is moving into the Carolinas because the area is one of the fastest-growing and potentially most lucrative air-travel markets in the country, White said. The service also will strengthen American's hub operations, he added. Fares for the new flights will be in line with the low-price "ultimate super-saver" rates American recently announced, White noted.

Some analysts interpret American's move as a direct challenge to Piedmont Airlines in Piedmont's home territory, especially at Charlotte, where American plans the most flights. Charlotte is one of Piedmont's own hubs. But Piedmont spokesmen said today that the American move into the Carolinas "is just another round of competition in a very competitive market."

"We are already highly competitive with them in some of these markets, even including their own Dallas-Fort Worth and Chicago hubs, and Los Angeles and San Francisco," said Ken Carlson, a Piedmont spokesman. Piedmont fares are competitive with American's, and "they were actually following our lead on some of these recent cuts," Carlson added.

Piedmont is continuing to watch its competitors' fares closely, Carlson added. No immediate response by Piedmont is expected to the recent announcement by People Express of fare increases by March 1 for most of its flights, he said.

The new American flights will have "a significant impact... they will take away some traffic, but it won't be any disaster" for Piedmont, said James D. Parker, an aviation analyst in Atlanta. "Piedmont is insulated somewhat by the fact that they already have considerable traffic of their own into these areas, and a major hub in Charlotte that negates the need for passengers to go out of their way through Chicago or Dallas to get to their destinations, especially in the northeast," he said.

The 12 American flights at Charlotte include three each to Chicago and Dallas-Fort Worth, and two each to Fayetteville, Charleston and Columbia. By comparison, Piedmont will have 155 daily departures at Charlotte by this spring.

Piedmont yesterday announced the first new flights in its 1985 expansion program. They will include non-stop service twice a day between Charlotte and the hub in Dayton, Ohio, starting March 15, and non-stop service twice a day between Charlotte and St. Louis, Mo., and Knoxville, Tenn. Since last fall, Piedmont has leased four more gates at Charlotte, for a total of 16, and has doubled its terminal area there.