



Y2K Dilemmas

INSURERS COULD NIX MILLENNIUM FLIGHTS



The insurance industry effectively holds the veto over whether airlines operate Jan. 1, 2000, not arguments about whether their computer systems are immune from infection by the Year 2000 bug, a conference was told.

If insurance companies decided to withdraw coverage for any year 2000 problem, this would force airlines to stay on the ground, said Andy Kyte, analyst at information technology consultant Gartner Group. "The attitude of the insurance industry will play the dominant role in what happens to airlines at the end of the century," Kyte said.



"Airlines are undoubtedly working very hard to fix

their systems, but to an extent it is largely a problem that will be decided by insurance. If insurance companies say they will not cover an airline for a year 2000 problem, airlines will not be able to cover themselves," said Kyte. Experts believe that computers might crash at midnight on December 31, 1999 because the year in any date is signified by the last two digits only. Thus they cannot distinguish between 1900 and 2000.

Last month at a conference in London, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines said it was not certain whether it could operate flights safely Jan. 1, 2000.

KLM's Chief Information Officer Max Rens said the airline had done everything it could to ensure the safety of operations, but was being let down by governments which were responsible for airports and air traffic control systems.

"In answer to the question, will you be flying in 2000, I reply "Yo" - that's a combination of yes and no. KLM is ready to fly, but in order to do that you have to cross borders and go to airports. Air traffic control is out of our hands," Rens said.

Since then many airlines around the world have disagreed with KLM and said they would be able to fly over the millennium.

Kyte, speaking later at Gartner Group's annual European conference, Symposium ITxpo98, said some computer chips pose a threat to crucial operations in mining and petrochemicals industries.

"When the millennium arrives there will be around 50 billion such (chip) devices on the planet, and as such, the industry/media is starting to predict another potential disaster," Kyte said.

But Kyte pointed out that most of these chips controlled unimportant products like toasters, coffee machines and blenders.

Kyte said there was only a slight risk, but some chips which operate with software could theoretically cause catastrophic damage in mining, petrochemical, oil and gas exploration and aggregates industries.

Railway systems which used chips which had been installed piecemeal also posed a risk, but could often be cured by simply switching the system off over the millennium, then restarting it.

MOTORISTS SEE RED YELLOW GREEN

Dublin's efforts to beat the bug have caused traffic chaos.

Engineers tried to prevent the problem - but caused one instead. The computer system which controls traffic lights in the Irish capital was upgraded on a weekend to try to avoid problems with the millennium "bug" in the year 2000. The traffic light control system became locked into a fixed time sequence which ignored peak periods. During Dublin's rush-hour, light-changing times are normally automatically dictated by the volume of vehicles on the streets. Engineers worked through Monday night to overcome the problem, but were unable to solve it in time for the Tuesday morning rush-hour. An Automobile Association spokesman said the incident demonstrated Dublin's vulnerability to traffic disruption.