

# News Release



## TAXIWAY TURF PUT TO TEST AT MIDWAY SURFACE MAY AID SAFETY, CUT COSTS

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Business Editors Chicago Tribune  
By Jon Hilkevitch

Along a taxiway at Midway Airport, the groundwork is being laid for an experiment designed to enhance airline safety while trimming the airport's operating costs.

Gone is the turf that may have had aesthetic value but also required constant maintenance. In its place, crews have installed a carpet of light green tufted fiber that from a distance could easily pass for grass. So far, only an 80-by-20 foot strip of the material, called AvTurf®, has been laid on the west end of Midway, the first airport in the world to experiment with the artificial grass. Airport officials said they hope there will be enough safety benefits and cost savings from the artificial turf to warrant installing it throughout the 350 acres of grassy areas at Midway and perhaps also at O'Hare International Airport.

Grass-cutting crews, which once a week during the warmer months must navigate among taxiing aircraft, would be eliminated, along with the associated labor costs. So would the risk of metal parts from the mowing equipment breaking off and scattering onto runways, creating a hazard for aircraft of potentially catastrophic dimensions. "The FAA is very interested in our testing," said assistant

Chicago aviation commissioner Al Perez, noting that last year there were a record 429 close calls and accidents nationwide involving airplanes and service vehicles crossing paths on airport runways and taxiways. Perez said other anticipated advantages of the turf include a reduction in aircraft striking birds while landing or taking off, because the synthetic grass eliminates food sources for wildlife. He said the artificial grass will also mean hazardous material spills and fires can be more easily contained and pilots can more easily maneuver and stop if their planes skid off the runway.

"We've poured jet fuel on it to try to burn this stuff, we've run over it with firetrucks and snow-clearing equipment and it has proven itself," said Perez, adding that the next test will be to roll an airplane over the AvTurf® in the spring to determine how well the faux grass resists rutting. He said fire and rescue officials at Midway have already praised the synthetic grass because they can get to an emergency more quickly by driving over the AvTurf® instead of having to steer around natural grass.

Pat Carr, an Air Force Reserve aircraft maintenance officer and the president of the six-month-old Chicago company that created the aviation turf, Airport Surface Technologies Inc., said AvTurf® has a life expectancy of 10 to 15 years. Carr said the only maintenance involved is vacuuming the product a couple of times a year. "I've lost friends in runway accidents, dug damaged landing gear out of the mud and repaired jet engines after they ingested birds," Carr said. "Our idea here was to come up with a common-sense approach to improve and standardize the safety areas near runways and taxiways." There were more than 5,000 "bird strikes" by aircraft last year, up from 1,720 in 1990, according to the Bird Strike Committee-USA, citing the increase in geese populations.

Airport Surface Technologies paid for the initial installation of the AvTurf®. Carr said the cost to buy the material will be \$3 to \$5 per square foot, which he said is less expensive than pouring concrete and maintaining it.