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At Miami International Airport, LSG Sky Chefs' 500 employees typically prepare meals for more than 300 passenger flights daily.

Heico Corp., with 31 domestic and international facilities, manufactures jet engine replacement parts for over 200 customers worldwide at its Broward headquarters and repairs commercial jet aircraft accessories in Miami.

Eulen America has more than 1,000 employees at MIA providing outsourced services such as baggage handling, cabin cleaning and passenger assistance to American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Mexicana, United and others.

Across South Florida, hundreds of companies and thousands of employees support the aviation industry. Some are small shops with a few dozen employees specializing in repairing planes' hydraulic equipment; others are publicly traded entities with market value of more than \$1 billion and customers worldwide.

While no agency seems to have a firm handle on the industry's economic impact, the data available points to Miami-Dade as a major international center for aviation, said Frank Nero, president and CEO of Miami-Dade's economic development organization, the Beacon Council.

More than a decade ago, the Beacon Council targeted the industry for its high growth potential. Over the past 12 years or so, manufacturing, repair, service and training companies have made significant capital outlays here. Total figures are difficult to estimate, but a small sample of investors -- AAR Corp., Airbus, Grupo Eulen, and a former partnership between Boeing and FlightSafety International -- accounts for more than \$230 million in investments in Miami-Dade.

The overall investment figure for companies supporting aviation is much higher.

Airbus, for example, has invested more than \$50 million since 1999 in a 110,000 square-foot complex for training flight crews, cabin attendants and maintenance personnel in Miami. Trainees usually come from Airbus aircraft operators in the United States, Canada and Latin America.

The center, the first custom-designed Airbus facility of its type in the United States, has six full-flight simulators for pilots, two fixed-base simulators and additional training equipment. The facility's 126 employees work with about 2,000 pilots, cabin attendants and maintenance personnel who train in Miami annually.

In 2007, recognizing Miami's access to Latin America, Airbus moved its Latin America and Caribbean sales and marketing teams from company headquarters in Toulouse, France, to Miami.

To attract other aviation companies, the Beacon Council visits air and trade shows and meets with potential investors. A key initiative, Nero said, is developing a Miami international commercial air show that could be staged in Homestead every two years.

“The Paris Air Show attracts 300,000 people every other year and exhibitors from all over the world,” he said. “We don’t have a major commercial air show in the U.S.”

A Miami show could also attract small and mid-size aviation companies that can’t afford to travel to shows overseas, and would be a new platform for the U.S. military to recruit and promote sales of military hardware, Nero said.

The Beacon Council is developing a plan for a show that might launch as early as 2012, though “there are still many hurdles,” he said.

Even without a commercial air show, aviation is already big business for Florida.

The state’s aviation sector provides tens of thousands of direct jobs and operates out of 129 public airports, more than 600 private airports and 27 military airfields, according to Enterprise Florida, a public-private economic development organization. One-fifth of the world’s flight training is carried out in the state; the country’s third largest group of maintenance, repair and overhaul facilities is located in Florida, it said.

As the gateway to Latin America and the Caribbean, Miami International Airport operates 87 scheduled and charter airlines and counted more than 347,000 flight operations last year -- thus generating the lion’s share of the region’s commercial aviation business. That volume acts as a magnet for companies offering goods and services to the sector.

Miami ranks as the top U.S. airport for international freight and No. 2 for international passengers, according to the Miami-Dade Aviation Department.

Though the economy hasn’t been kind to all -- one of the region’s biggest air cargo operations, Arrow Air, shut down earlier this summer -- aviation remains huge. Add in Miami-Dade’s general aviation airports, including Opa-Locka and Kendall-Tamiami Executive Airport, and the Miami-Dade airports generate a total annual economic impact of \$26.7 billion, according to aviation department reports. That’s almost 25 percent of the county’s total economy.

The result: 282,000 direct and indirect local jobs in Miami-Dade County alone, the department estimates. Add in Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport’s \$2.4 billion in economic impact, and the importance of aviation to South Florida becomes clear.