

Up in the Air

Plans to expand London's airport capacity remain touch and go. BY LISA MATTE

There's turbulence in the air around London as private, public and political factions face off in a debate over how — and where — to accommodate increased demand for airport access *and* remain competitive with other major European gateways.

While few question the need for increased air traffic capacity in the London area, a solution remains elusive, with options including a third runway at London Heathrow, development of a new airport in the Thames Estuary (about 40 miles east of central London where the Thames River meets the North Sea), and expansion at Gatwick Airport to create a dual hub with Heathrow all drawing criticism.

In a January 2014 report, the Airports Commission, established by British Prime Minister David Cameron in 2012 to study the need for expansion and to propose action, effectively ruled out the Thames Estuary option, citing expense and a 20-year timeframe for building an airport from scratch.

With a follow-up report slated for release this summer, the debate focuses on the two remaining options: building a third runway at Heathrow or building a second runway at Gatwick.

In its 2014 report, the Airports Commission clearly identified Heathrow expansion as the frontrunner, citing competition from airports in Frankfurt, Paris and Amsterdam as a threat to London's place as a world hub.

An excerpt from the report: "The government's vision is for Britain to win the global race for jobs and economic growth. To do so we must be better connected to future growth markets — Asia, South America, North America — than our European competitors. ... Heathrow is one of the world's best-connected hubs and is well placed to help Britain win the global race. Any alternative, including doing nothing or a split hub, will weaken Britain's competitiveness."

In support of its position, the Airports Com-



LONDON HUBBUB: Heathrow Terminal 5 (top), and arrivals area at Heathrow

PHOTOS: © IRSTONE | DREAMSTIME.COM

mission cited economic growth, new jobs, a more favorable timeframe and the opportunity to plan future growth into the development process. Key concerns among detractors include environmental and noise issues.

Predicting the outcome of the Airports Commission's scheduled update this summer, *The Guardian* reported in mid-May: "The final choice will be a test of government commitment to the environment. Informed sources say Gatwick is not out of the running."

Airports Commission Report

heathrow.com/airportscommission

The Guardian

theguardian.com/us

