AIR TRANSPORT GUY NORRIS / LOS ANGELES

Airbus unveils plan to combat 7E7

Manufacturer to meet airlines to discuss concepts to compete with Boeing airliner in 200- to 250-seat market

Airbus has begun briefing airlines on advanced concepts to compete with Boeing's proposed 7E7 for the 200- to 250-seat market. The ideas are thought to include all-new and A330-derivative configurations.

The "customer forum" meetings are being held in Atlanta, Frankfurt and Hong Kong, and almost certainly have been timed to counter Boeing's high-profile two-day 7E7 "progress summit" held in Seattle on 12-13 November and which attracted delegates from around 40 operators. No specific details of the forum agendas have been given other than that they are addressing Airbus's "updated view on the 200- to 250-seat market".

Although Airbus is keeping study concepts for this market close to its chest, they are believed to focus on revised versions of the A305/30X configuration that was originally conceived as an A300/A310 replacement after plans for an A330-500 shrink derivative were abandoned.

Industry sources say engine suppliers have been instructed to maintain a low profile for the Atlanta meeting, but are being asked by Airbus to present fuller details of proposed next-generation engine concepts for the 200- to 250-seat market at the Frankfurt meeting. These will be derivatives of the General Electric Gen-X, Pratt & Whitney PW-EXX and Rolls-Royce Trent 7E7/RB262 engine competing for a place on the 7E7. All three engines are "bleedless", to reflect Boeing's more-electric philosophy for the 7E7, and would have to be adapted to suit the conventional bleed air needs of the Airbus family.

Airbus says that it "regularly provides airlines and customers with updates of its view of various market segments...these are part of our normal activities". However, it declines to comment on whether any new product studies or proposals for the 250-seat market will be unveiled during the briefings.

With Airbus giving full priority to the A380, sources say any potential next-generation competitor to the 7E7 would probably not be available until around two years after the new Boeing, or roughly 2010. This suggests Airbus will be more likely to follow the more-electric, bleedless design adopted by Boeing, and would therefore lean more towards new designs rather than a relatively straightforward re-engined A330. Although more costly to develop, this would also provide a stepping-stone towards a next generation 300- to 350-seater family, rather than an interim stopgap solution.

DEFENCE

Boeing to militarise 737 for MMA

Boeing plans to militarise about a fifth of the Next Generation 737 airframe to satisfy US Navy requirements for the Multi-mission Maritime Aircraft (MMA).

Boeing's 737 MMA team – which includes Northrop Grumman and Raytheon – and Lockheed Martin's Orion 21 team must submit final bids to the USN for the MMA contract by 29 December, with a system development and demonstration award expected in May 2004.

Export controls mean Boeing cannot fully assemble the MMA's militarised parts at the 737 plant in Renton, Washington.

"We're looking at exactly how we're going to operate that modification facility, how we're going to take that green 737 off the production line in Renton, and whether we're going to run a different production line," says Boeing. Its MMA design shares around 80% commonality with the civil 737. Key differences include a strengthened wing with hardpoints for external stores and an internal bomb bay in the aft cargo hold.

DEFENCE RAINER UPHOFF / MADRID

EPI launch bolsters Spanish grip on European military transport work

The Europrop International (EPI) consortium, which was selected last May to develop the TP400-D6 engine for the Airbus Military A400M military transport, last week opened its headquarters in San Fernando de Henares, near Madrid.

Spain's ITP, MTU of Germany, Rolls-Royce of the UK and France's Snecma are the founding members of EPI, which will develop and manufacture the TP400, the West's largest turboprop engine.

The establishment of EPI alongside Airbus Military and EADS Casa in Madrid consolidates Spain's position as EADS's centre of excellence for military transport aircraft. The final assembly line for the A400M will be in Seville.

Jean Paul Herteman, president of EPI and chief executive of Snecma, says the TP400 "will contribute to the development of the high-technology aeroengine industry in Europe, securing over 5,000 high-value, high-skilled jobs across Europe. We have founded EPI in order to act as a single engine-maker company."

RAINER UPHOFF

Herteman: TP400 *(left)* will secure jobs

TP400 programme chief engineer Alfredo Lopez says the engine will offer a maximum power of 10,600shp (7,900kW), 10% more than required. It will weigh 1,830kg (4,026lb). Its tactical mission fuel consumption is specified at 1,850 litres/h (490USgal/h); logistical mission consumption at 3,200 litres/h.

A first conceptual design will be finished later this month, with final design concluded within a year. The TP400's first ground tests are due in August 2005, and its first flight on a testbed aircraft in December 2006. The A400M will have its first flight in November 2007, with first deliveries to customers in August 2009.