Soloy to restart Pathfinder 21

GRAHAM WARWICK/WASHINGTON DC

SOLOY PLANS to complete certification of the Pathfinder 21, a re-engined, twin-turbine, Cessna Grand Caravan, after taking over responsibility for the programme from engine supplier Pratt & Whitney Canada.

The Olympia, Washington-based company says it hopes to raise the $2.5 million required to complete certification within 60-90 days. At the same time, Soloy is planning to raise funds for a programme to re-engine Caravans with more powerful P&W WC 186 turboprop.

The Pathfinder 21 is a major modification of the Cessna 208B Grand Caravan which replaces the aircraft's single PT6A with a Dual Pac propulsion system comprising two PT6D-114As driving a single propeller through a Soloy-developed combining/reduction gearbox.

The fuselage is stretched 1.8m (6ft) to accommodate up to 17 passengers. An integral cargo pod has been installed and gross weight is raised from 4,000kg (8,750lb) to 5,670kg. Power is increased from 500kW (675shp) to 950kW.

The project has been dormant for some time, although Soloy had built a flying prototype and static test article. The Dual Pac propulsion system was certified over a year ago, and chairman Joe Soloy says the company plans to gain a supplemental type certificate for the Pathfinder 21 conversion in time to restart the programme.

The conversion is expected to cost $1.3-1.5 million, including a new engine and modification of the Caravan's existing PT6A, Soloy says. The modification is aimed at customers who want the utility of the Caravan combined with the safety of a twin-turbine aircraft.

Soloy is working on another Caravan conversion which involves re-engining the aircraft with a single 635kW PT6A-42. The increase in power will improve the aircraft's climb rate, and, in particular, its ability to climb above icing. The conversion is expected to cost at least $600,000.

Slowdown signs for US shipments

ARICRAFT SHIPMENTS by US general aviation manufacturers showed the first signs of a slowdown in the first quarter, although total billings were boosted to a record $2.1 billion by an increase in business jet deliveries.

According to figures from the US General Aviation Manufacturers Association (GAMA), shipments by member companies slipped 7.3% to 568 aircraft compared with last year's first quarter. Although business jet deliveries rose 7.4%, to 146 aircraft, shipments of turboprop- and piston-powered aircraft both fell, the latter by 13.3%, to 347 aircraft. Cessna shipped 27 fewer piston aircraft in the first quarter, New Piper 20 and Raytheon 12.

New Piper's piston output dropped because it has halted production of the Malibu Mirage in favour of the single-turboprop Meridian. Although 25 Meridians were delivered in the first quarter, turboprop shipments fell 2.6%, to 85 aircraft. Raytheon delivered almost 50% fewer King Airs and Beech 1900Ds compared with the same period last year.

Overall, business jet shipments were up, although Bombardier Learjet 31A and Raytheon Beechjet 400A deliveries slipped slightly. Cessna delivered 62 Citations, and Boeing Business Jets the first two stretched BBJ2s.

SkyAir launches PC-12 fractional programme

Kate Sarsfield/LONDON

A SINGLE-ENGINE fractional leasing programme has been set up in Zurich, Switzerland, with Pilatus PC-12 turboprops.

SkyAir TimeJet has already taken delivery of five aircraft, making it the largest European PC-12 operator, and has signed up 14 customers. "We hope to add two aircraft and five to six customers to our programme each year and already have two more PC-12s on order which will be delivered early next year," says SkyAir chief executive Juerg Fleischmann.

SkyAir says there is "high demand" for the seven-seat PC-12 within Europe. "TimeJet is typically aimed at small and medium size companies which need to avoid delay ridden international airports," says Fleischmann.

SkyAir hopes to raise awareness of single engine turboprop-based travel

TimeJet customers subscribe to 50, 100 or 150 flight hours a year, which includes monthly management and operating costs. For a 100th contract, customers pay a monthly leasing fee of SFr9,000 ($5,200), SFr1,500 per occupied flight hour and aircraft handling fees of SFr300 per landing. Response time, only guaranteed under the 100th and 150th contracts, is set at 24h and 18h respectively.

Although SkyAir is believed to be the only European PC-12 fractional operator, a similar shared ownership programme deploying Socata TBM-700s was launched in February by Luxembourg-based Jetfly Aviation. An impending decision by the European Joint Aviation Authorities to approve commercial single-engine instrument flight rules operations could also result in an influx of single turboprop-based charter operations in the region.

Low-Earth-orbit satcom system resumes service

HONEYWELL has resumed marketing of Iridium-based worldwide satellite communications (satcom) systems for aircraft.

Before Iridium went bankrupt in 1999, AlliedSignal (now Honeywell) had exclusive rights to market single-channel systems and provide service to general aviation operators. Now the low-Earth-orbit satcom system has resumed operations.

Honeywell's Airsat 1 equipment and OneLink service is available immediately. Equipment will cost roughly $29,500 per shipset, and call costs will range from $2.25 to $3.75 per minute. The system consists of an aircraft-mounted transceiver and antenna and a telephone handset which is also compatible with GSM mobile networks.

The current satellite constellation has an expected life of over five years. System operator Boeing will launch seven spare spacecraft beginning next year.