

AIRCRAFT DEVELOPMENT GUY NORRIS / LOS ANGELES

Sonic defined as airlines come back

Boeing moves into next optimisation cycle as airlines return to the table and traffic shows signs of recovery

Boeing is starting to define the final loads, flight-control laws and overall shape of the Sonic Cruiser, following the completion of the first cycle of windtunnel tests. It is also resuming talks on the high-speed aircraft with airlines that have started to return to Everett for the first time since last September.

"We now have discussions going on with up to 15 major airlines," says Sonic Cruiser programme vice president Walt Gillette.

Boeing has also completed the initial network analysis work enabling it to put a value on speed, and in turn, help define the optimum capacity of the Mach 0.98 aircraft. Overall definition of the aircraft is expected to be completed by the end of next year.

A senior source at one of the key airlines involved in the discussions

says Boeing has assumed "premium ticket-pricing to make the economics work", adding that he is not convinced that the aircraft, as specified, offers enough time-saving to justify it.

The aircraft size is now firmly defined as between 190 seats in mostly premium configuration seating, to mixed loads of up to 250. Talks have resumed with potential airlines on a "one-to-one" basis, says Gillette, who adds the "working-together" idea used in the development of the 777 is not as easy to apply in the early phases of the Sonic Cruiser. "With a new type of aircraft like this, there is more competition between them [the airlines] on how they might use it," he says. However, Gillette adds that pan-airline teams will be formed.

Boeing is meanwhile moving into the next optimisation cycle and will help refine materials selection, build strategies, define systems and fine-tune the aerodynamic shape. This phase also includes organising suppliers to join its technology development team and, although it was originally targeted for completion by April, it is now widely expected to drift to mid-year.

A critical element of the Boeing plan is to select optimised system solutions from packages created by the first and second-tier suppliers who are being urged to forge partnerships to bid for Sonic Cruiser work. The partnerships involve risk-share participation.

■ Boeing has expressed surprise at the speed of recovery in airline traf-

fic, but says that airlines will only start ordering aircraft again when they regain profitability.

"Europe is the real surprise," says Boeing Commercial Airplanes vice-president marketing Randy Baseler. "Traffic is rebounding faster than most analysts, and certainly we, thought." Baseler's view last November was that global traffic growth would decline at least by an annual 6%. Now he expects "traffic to equal pre-11 September levels by the end of the year".

The manufacturer expects "deeply discounted fares to expire gradually", so that by the end of this year, yields should also "greatly improve". But the airline industry will only "be in a position" to place orders in the second half of mid-2003, when it will have returned to profitability.

PURCHASE

Kenya drops 767-400ER order for 777

Kenya Airways has decided to stick with Boeing for its long-haul fleet, switching its 767-400ER order to the larger 777-200ER. The airline had commitments for the now-defunct 767-400ERX model, but had to rethink the deal when Boeing cancelled the project last year. Airbus submitted an offer based on the A330-200, but the Kenyan flag carrier has decided to remain faithful to Boeing, and has ordered three 777-200ERs for delivery from 2004.

"This completes the plan for our long-term widebody fleet," says Kenya Airways chairman Isaac Omolo Okero.

Last year, Kenya introduced three Boeing 767-300ERs, which are replacing the airline's Airbus A310-300s on its long-haul routes.

The last A310 is due to be retired next month, making the airline an all-Boeing operator.

LANDING FEES

KIAC to slash charges once more

Faced with increasing competition, as Tokyo's Narita opens a second runway, Kansai International Airport (KIAC) is planning to again reduce its landing fees from the end of March. The government-owned airport's landing fees,

among the world's highest, will fall by up to 50% for international and domestic carriers.

The airport launched similar discounts a year ago but failed to stop many airlines pulling out or curtailing operations.

FLEET UPGRADE

Wuhan to lease MA60 turboprops

China's Wuhan Airlines has agreed to lease three Xian Aircraft (XAC) MA60 turboprop aircraft in a move that will make it the third operator of the indigenously built type.

The aircraft, a modernised variant of the Antonov An-24-based Y-7, is equipped with Pratt & Whitney Canada PW127J turboprop engines, Rockwell Collins avionics and a Honeywell auxiliary power unit.

XAC manager Gao Dacheng says Wuhan will take delivery of three MA60s. The first will be delivered in April, followed by the second and third over the following two months. Some of the aircraft will be used to replace Wuhan's ageing Y-7s.

Gao says the 56-60-seat aircraft will be leased from Chinese state-run Shenzhen Financial Leasing, which late in 2000 announced that it would acquire 60 for use by Chinese airlines.



START-UP

BMI delivers low-price baby

Bmibaby, the newly created no-frills arm of BMI British Midland, launched services last week from East Midlands Airport to Barcelona, Dublin, Malaga, Murcia, Nice, Faro, Palma and Prague. Services to Ibiza will begin in May. The airline is operating two Boeing 737-300s transferred from BMI. "We have been staggered by the demand since we opened for bookings just six weeks ago," says Bmibaby managing director Tony Davis. Rival low-cost carrier Go launched services from East Midlands earlier this month.