Bell admits future of BA609 is tied to troubled V-22 Osprey

Development of civil tiltrotor slows as maker confirms link with grounded military V-22

Bell Helicopter has denied it is to cancel the Bell/Agusta Aerospace BA609 civil tiltrotor but has confirmed that it is slowing development work on the machine.

The company has acknowledged for the first time that the future of the BA609 is inextricably tied to the fate of the US Marine Corps' (USMC) troubled Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey programme.

"When the BA609 programme began in 1996 it was planned and scheduled to follow the V-22 programme," says John Murphey, recently appointed Bell chairman and chief executive. "The management team that started this programme believed that the V-22 must lead tiltrotor technology into the market - I still believe that." This position contrasts with recent efforts by the company to distance the BA609 from the Osprey, which has been grounded for 15 months.

Because of this, and a cash crunch, Bell has decided to slow development and certification of the BA609, but has yet to offer a revised schedule (Flight International, 19-25 March).

The programme has been hit by a series of delays, but as recently as February's HAI Heli-Expo show the company suggested the six-to-nine-seat tiltrotor would fly around the end of June. Under the original schedule, production deliveries were due to have started early this year.

Flight testing of the V-22 is to resume next month and, under a structured development and operational evaluation schedule, is not expected to enter USMC service before 2005 (Flight International, 29 January-4 February).

"I don't believe a commercial version can be successful in the market until the V-22 completes this latest testing," says Murphey.

The decision to delay the BA609 was not directed by Bell's parent company Textron, says Murphey. It is not yet clear what implications this will have on the joint venture with Agusta, which has a 25% stake in the BA609 programme and wants to pursue a larger European tiltrotor development programme based on its Erica concept. "We are discussing this decision with Agusta to plan a programme schedule that allows the V-22 to lead this technology," says Murphey.

The delay could fuel demands for refunds from customers who have placed orders for around 80 BA609s, sources suggest. Prospective operators are understood to have placed $100,000 deposits against each commitment.

SECURITY

USA rethinks ban on National flights

A proposal to allow "qualified" general aviation operations to resume at Washington DC's National Airport has been presented to the US Transportation Safety Administration (TSA).

Airlines have been authorised to return to pre-11 September capacity at National by 15 April, but business aircraft will remain barred.

The US National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) has proposed that the US Federal Aviation Administration issue "security letters of authorisation" (SLOAs) to Part 91 and Part 135 operators that comply with certain security procedures. A security letter would allow a qualified operator access to National, which is less than 10km (6 miles) from the White House and Congress. A SLOA would also guarantee access to US airspace at times of heightened security.

Although operators of foreign-registered and crewed aircraft could receive a security letter for general access to US airspace, under the NBAA proposal only US-registered and crewed aircraft could access National. The proposal calls for background checks on aircraft owners, operators and crews, as well as passenger vetting.

The NBAA says the TSA and the US Secret Service, responsible for security at National, have committed to giving the SLOA proposal "their highest attention" and adds that an implementation schedule could be in place as early as 8 April.

The NBAA says a rival proposal to use designated gateway airports for security checks, the system used to control access to Salt Lake City, Utah, during the Winter Olympics, is "too difficult".

TERMINAL BUILT

London City Airport has completed construction of its new general aviation terminal. The 8,500m² (91,500ft²) facility includes an apron large enough for 20 business jets. The airport says it has seen a 250% increase in corporate traffic since 1995. Meanwhile, Cessna has published a flight manual supplement for the 5.5" approach at the airport.

CHARTER GROWING

Delta AirElite Business Jets has added its first Cessna Citation CJ1 and a third Bombardier Learjet 60 to its growing charter management fleet. The Cincinnati, Ohio-based Delta Air Lines subsidiary has more than doubled its managed fleet within six months and now offers charters in 13 aircraft. Raytheon Aircraft Charter & Management has added eight aircraft to its 40-strong fleet, including four King Airs and two Beechjet 400As.