Boeing Patches Up Faulty 787 Wings After Delays

EVERETT, Wash. (AP) — Boeing Co. (NYSE:BA [1]) said Thursday it has finished fixing structural flaws in the first of its long-delayed 787 jetliners. The problem forced the company to postpone test flying the jet for a fifth time earlier this year.

The Chicago-based airplane maker said the repair within the joint where the wings attach to the plane's fuselage is "a significant step" toward the first test flight of the aircraft, which has been delayed due to a series of production glitches and a two-month labor strike late last year.

Boeing has postponed the plane's inaugural test flight and deliveries five times, putting it more than two years behind schedule. The company reiterated that it plans to fly the 787 for the first time by the end of 2009.

"Completing this work is a significant step toward first flight," Scott Fancher, vice president and general manager of the 787 program, said in a statement.

The repair, which involves installing 34 small, reinforced fittings, will be tested on a static airframe later this month. If successful, Boeing will resume final preflight work on the initial 787, Fancher said, and the company remains confident the first flight will occur before the end of the year.

Other 787s being completed by Boeing will be modified in the weeks ahead, he said.

Repeated delays of the 787 have cost Boeing credibility and billions of dollars in anticipated expenses and penalties.

The 787 is built for fuel efficiency with lightweight carbon composite parts. Boeing says it will be more efficient, quieter and have lower emissions than other airplanes. The midsize plane also will have wider seats and aisles, and larger windows.

Boeing has taken a new approach to building airplanes with the 787, relying on suppliers around the world to build huge sections of the plane that are later assembled at its commercial aircraft plant in Everett.

But that approach so far has proved problematic, with ill-fitting parts and other problems hampering production. Some airlines have been forced to cancel or postpone plans to buy new 787s. Boeing has had 13 new orders for the 787 so far this year, but 83 cancellations.

The 787's wings are made by Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and the structure where they join the fuselage by Fuji Heavy Industries, also of Japan. The design of that part of the aircraft has been handled by the two companies along with Boeing.

Boeing announced the problem in the wing-fuselage joint in June. At the time, Fancher said it involved "a relatively small number of parts and a relatively simple modification."

Boeing has stressed that the problem was a structural reinforcement issue and not a problem with materials or workmanship.

Late last month, Boeing said it would open a second assembly line for the 787 with nonunion workers in South Carolina, not in Everett, where it has built its widebody jets for more than half a century.

Shares of Boeing slipped 40 cents to close at $50.28.

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