Boeing's 787 Dreamliner Spreads Its Wings... Today

George Tibbits, Associated Press Writer

EVERETT, Wash. (AP) — Weather permitting, Boeing Co. plans to finally get its new 787 jetliner into the air Tuesday, more than two years after it had intended.

The test aircraft completed its ground tests during the weekend, including a 150-mph dash down the runway at Everett's Paine Field during which its nose gear briefly lifted off the pavement. Tuesday morning, pilots Michael Carriker and Randall Neville hope to take the 787 on a four-hour flight over Washington state, beginning the extensive flight test program needed to obtain the plane's Federal Aviation Administration certification.

Before landing at Seattle's Boeing Field, the two-member crew will perform a variety of basic tests and systems checks, said Boeing Commercial Airplanes spokesman Jim Proulx. "They will essentially make sure that the airplane under normal circumstances flies the way it's supposed to fly," he said.

Proulx said good visibility, no standing water at the two airports and gentle or no wind are needed for the initial flight, but he noted it was raining when Boeing's previous all-new airplane, the 777, made its first flight 15 years ago.

Tuesday's forecast called for rain, 10 mph winds and a cloud ceiling at about 1,500 feet, National WeatherService meteorologist Ted Buehner said — nothing to prevent a modern jetliner from flying.

The plane is the first of six 787s Boeing will use in the flight test program, expected to last about nine months and subject the planes to conditions well beyond those found in normal airline service. Chicago-based Boeing, which has orders for 840 787s, plans to make the first delivery to Japan's All Nippon Airways late next year.

The 787 is a radical departure for Boeing: About 50 percent of the plane is made of lightweight composite materials, with large sections produced by suppliers around the globe and assembled by Boeing at Everett. The plane, Boeing says, will be quieter, produce fewer emissions and use 20 percent less fuel than comparable aircraft, while passengers will enjoy a more comfortable cabin with better air quality and larger windows.

But the program has been plagued by ill-fitting parts and other problems. The first flight was supposed to be in 2007 with deliveries the following year, but Boeing has been forced to push that back five times — delays that have cost the company credibility, sales and billions of dollars. Most recently, Boeing said it needed to reinforce the area where the wings join the fuselage, with tests completed on that fix just two weeks ago.

An eight-week strike last year by Seattle-area production workers also hampered the program and was a factor in Boeing choosing North Charleston, S.C., in October as the site for a second 787 assembly line.

The 787 remains Boeing's best-selling new plane to date, though some airlines have been forced to cancel or postpone purchase plans due to the weak global economy.

The version being tested will be able to fly up to 250 passengers about 9,000 miles. A stretch version will be capable of carrying 290 passengers and a short-range model up to 330.

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