China Heavy-Lift Chopper Receives Certification

BEIJING (AP) — China's civil aviation authority on Thursday cleared the country's biggest-ever helicopter for domestic use, its state-owned manufacturer said.

The 13.8-ton AC313 is the latest advance for China's ambitious aerospace industry that spans military jets, commercial airliners, and even a manned space flight program.

The aircraft from Aviation Industry Corporation of China made its first test flight in March 2010 and certification means companies can immediately take delivery and start commercial flights. Its first customer is northeast China-based China Flying Dragon Aviation, which flies cargo and passenger charter flights and does utility work such as forest fire fighting. It plans to lease the first five AC313s produced.

AVIC has said it also plans to apply for U.S. and European certification to allow foreign sales, but hasn't said when it will do so.

The AC313 is also the latest example of China's adaptation of foreign technology that has facilitated numerous breakthroughs in its aviation industry.

The aircraft is a larger and heavily modified version of the 7-ton Zhi-8 medium transport helicopter that is a close copy of the French SA 321 Super Frelon. China bought 13 of the French helicopters in the 1970s and at least one was reportedly disassembled for study and reverse-engineering.

It is powered by Pratt & Whitney PT6B-67A engines from Canada, underscoring China's weakness in that key technology.

AVIC says the aircraft is suitable for missions ranging from search and rescue to sightseeing and can operate in harsh conditions at a maximum range of 560 miles (900 kilometers) and at altitudes of almost 28,000 feet (8,500 meters). It can carry up to 5 tons of cargo in a sling along with 27 passengers or 15 injured on stretchers.

AVIC has been the linchpin in China's aviation push, building latest-generation fighter jets and midrange commercial airliners, and is now working on a larger plane that would compete with Airbus and Boeing.

At 56 tons, the Russian Mi-26 is far and away the world's largest helicopter, twice as heavy as the American CH-47 Chinook.

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