

Tornado Damage Stalls Wichita Aircraft Industry

Heather Hollingsworth, Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Tornado damage in Kansas' aircraft manufacturing hub could have a ripple effect on the industry, analysts warned Monday, even as airplane makers Boeing and Hawker Beechcraft and nearby parts maker Spirit AeroSystems were still tallying losses.

All three companies were hit by a tornado Saturday, when a massive storm system spawned dozens of tornadoes in the Great Plains. The twister that tore through the Wichita, Kan., area, where the companies are located, packed winds of 136 to 165 miles per hour. It tore off roofs, blew out windows and knocked out power.

Spirit AeroSystems Holdings Inc. was struck first and suffered the most damage. Most of the 155 buildings on its 11 million-square-foot campus were damaged, a handful substantially, spokeswoman Debbie Gann said. Crews began restoring power and natural gas service Monday, but operations are shut down at least through Tuesday, she said.

Jason Gursky, an aerospace analyst for San Francisco-based Citigroup Global Markets, said the destruction at the facility is a "huge deal," noting that it makes engine covers and fuselage and nose sections for Boeing Co. Its other customers include Airbus, Sikorsky, Bombardier, Mitsubishi, Rolls Royce and Gulfstream.

Gann said it was too early to predict how the production schedule would be affected, although it was possible some parts would be shipped by week's end.

"We won't flip a switch and be back to full production," Gann said. "The damage is substantial in some areas and not as substantial in others, so that's the assessment we are trying to do, 'What can we do to get back up and running quickly?' Some of it, if we get power restored, we can turn it back on. Other areas we may have to relocate some of the other operations into other buildings that weren't as damaged."

Spirit AeroSystems employs about 10,800 people in Wichita. None of the 215 who were working when the tornado hit were injured, she said.

After roaring through Spirit AeroSystems' campus, the tornado hit Boeing's nearby facilities. Then it struck McConnell Air Force Base and Hawker Beechcraft.

Structural engineers from St. Louis and Seattle spent Monday assessing damage to Boeing's 97 buildings. Spokeswoman Yvonne Johnson-Jones said there was damage to at least seven of them, including three or four office buildings and a couple hangars, and work was suspended until Wednesday.

Overall, the buildings "appear to be very sound," and the damage mostly involves

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roofs, doors and windows, Johnson-Jones said. The plant is slated to close in 2014, and she said the tornado isn't expected to alter the timeline.

Hawker Beechcraft reported no damage to aircraft and limited and isolated damage to the roof of its manufacturing facility. The company said in an email that all regularly scheduled personnel reported to work Monday.

Gursky said there is no precedence for Wichita's aircraft industry being hit so hard. He said a tornado clipped a Boeing building in the 1990s but the damage wasn't nearly as substantial.

"The supply chain would have to slow down, and that is going to affect pretty much anybody who feeds into Boeing," Gursky said. "I've got to imagine that there aren't going to be a lot of planes rolling off the lines this week."

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