Solar Plane Makes 2nd Attempt In Morocco Flight

Paul Schemm, Associated Press

RABAT, Morocco (AP) — An experimental solar plane hoping to one day fly around the world tried again Thursday to fly over Morocco's Atlas Mountains after being thwarted a week ago by high winds.

The delicate Solar Impulse has the immense wing span of a commercial jet but is only the weight of a family car, making it quite vulnerable to bad weather. It took off in the morning from the capital Rabat and hopes to reach the city of Ouarzazate, 280 miles (465 kilometers) away by late evening, where it will fly over the site of Morocco's proposed solar power plant.

Pilot Andre Borschberg attempted the same flight on June 14 but had to turn back after unexpectedly strong winds buffeted the slow-moving plane and sent it reeling backwards. The plane has relatively weak battery-powered turboprop engines that are recharged by the 12,000 photovoltaic cells covering its body. It is the only solar powered craft that can fly day and night.

"Because of its big size and low speed, we cannot go into areas of heavy turbulence like the big commercial planes can," Borschberg told The Associated Press from the cockpit of the aircraft as he flew over Morocco's coastline near Casablanca.

An improved version of the plane hopes to make a round-the-world flight by 2014 and Borschberg said they will be careful to choose a route that offers the calmest weather.

The plane will never replace fuel-powered commercial flights, its creators say, but rather was designed to showcase the possibilities for solar power.

Morocco was chosen as the destination for its first transcontinental flight from Europe because of the North African kingdom's ambitious plans to create huge solar energy plants — the first of which will be constructed at Ouarzazate.

Morocco plans to eventually build five solar plants to lessen its dependence on fossil fuels and produce 2,000 megawatts of solar energy by 2020. By that year, it hopes to derive 40 percent of its energy needs from renewable energy resources and eventually export electricity to Europe.

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