

# Maserati Confident In Italy Output Despite Turmoil

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NICE, France (AP) — The CEO of Italian luxury carmaker Maserati is confident that parent company Fiat's €1.2 billion (\$1.5 billion) investment to boost production in Italy will bring results despite political instability that once again was endangering the country's financial health.

"I am a guest in this country and I won't make comments on the Italian political situation," Maserati CEO Harald Wester, a German national, said Monday at the presentation of the new Quattroporte. "But I am convinced of the good sense, the intelligence and the reasonability of the Italians, and that our investments will go well and bring the desired results."

Fiat is investing €1.2 billion from 2011-2014 to produce three new Maserati models in Italy, part of the carmaker's focus on luxury models to propel its European operations to profit. Alfa Romeo, which Wester also runs, is also a key part of the plan.

Maserati's ambitious plans call for selling 50,000 Maserati's a year by 2014 — a leap from the 6,200 sold last year. Sales in the first nine months of this year were up 2 percent from 4,672 units to 4,754 units.

Wester on Monday presented one of the cornerstones of its growth strategy — the Quattroporte sedan — some 20 centimeters longer than its predecessor and fitted with a Ferrari-made engine that Maserati said will make it the fastest sedan on the roads, with a top speed of 307 kilometers an hour.

The Quattroporte will be officially launched in January at the Detroit Motor Show, and go on sale in Europe later that month. But its main markets will be the United States and China, where Fiat hopes to nibble away at volumes in the high-volume luxury car makers like BMW, Porsche and Mercedes.

After the Quattroporte, Maserati will launch the smaller Ghibli later next year and the SUV Levante by the end of 2014. Investments through the end of this year total €787 million.

Production of the Quattroporte and the Ghibli will reach 20,000 by the end of next year, securing jobs for 1,500 workers at the Grugliasco plant near Turin, where a total of nearly €1 billion will be invested to modernize the assembly lines.

The site of the SUV production has not been confirmed, but media reports have put it at Mirafiori in Turin, while current production of the sports models Granturismo and Grancabrio will continue at the brand's headquarters in Modena.

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Beyond expanding its model range, Maserati is focusing on quality and will increase its dealer outlets in its quest for volumes.

Wester said Maserati has worked to improve quality since 2005 and has seen its ratings from JD Power go from "off the charts" to "in the ball park." while warranty claims have gone down by 90 percent in the period. Dealer outlets will grow from 250 to 450 — though shy of earlier targets of 500 due to the collapse of the European car market due to the continent's sovereign debt crisis.

Europe will contribute just 15 percent of global sales, Wester said. The slim target is due mostly to stiff competition in the segment by European automakers.

"In Germany, we could have been idiots if we would have calculated all of these people would come to our cars," Wester said. Yet he said the Quattroporte "is a real alternative. It is, matter of fact." But he said it was impossible to expect that big German companies that buy fleet cars would "change and order Maseratis. This is not going to happen, despite some exceptions."

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