

Airbus Confident Of Avoiding Boeing Battery Issue

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BLAGNAC, France (AP) — Airbus said it was confident it would not run into the same problems afflicting Boeing Co.'s Dreamliner, related to a type of battery both companies use, but lost the crown as the world's largest plane maker to its archrival despite record deliveries.

Boeing's 787 Dreamliners have been grounded by aviation organizations around the world, including in the U.S. and Europe, following concerns about the safety of the airplane's lithium ion battery system. The batteries in some cases swelled and leaked, creating a fire hazard under the cockpit, where they are stored.

Airbus's new A350 wide-body jet, a rival to Boeing's 787 that will make its first flight around the middle of the year, also uses lithium ion batteries, but in a different setup. As a result, the company said the plane was unlikely to face the same problems.

Speaking to reporters at the company's annual commercial results presentation Thursday, Airbus Chief Executive Fabrice Bregier said "we are confident our design is robust" and "don't see any reason to change."

He noted the A350 requires only half the battery power of a plane like the 787, which is the first commercial aircraft to make extensive use of batteries to drive its electrical systems and be fuel-efficient.

"There are some architectural differences and the suppliers are different," said Bregier. "As Boeing said, the battery is not the issue, it's the way you integrate it to the power system."

Airbus has had its own share of technical problems that have delayed the rollout of a key military aircraft, costing billions in extra costs, as well as security issues concerning the wing ribs of its superjumbo A380 jets.

Despite those concerns and a weak global economy, Airbus booked a record 588 deliveries in 2012 while taking in 914 new orders for jets. For 2013, it plans to increase production to deliver more than 600 aircraft and expects orders for at least 700 jets.

The results were not enough to match Boeing, which for all its current troubles, regained the crown of biggest airplane manufacturer in 2012. The company delivered 601 last year, the most since 1999.

The two companies have been competing neck and neck for years, rushing to roll

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out new models that might appeal most to global airlines.

Among commercial planes, Boeing bet big on the Dreamliner and its appeal as a high-tech and fuel efficient model. At a time of high oil prices, that was a big selling point with airlines, many of which were trying to cut costs. Airbus is focusing instead on size — the new A380 is a double-decker that seats 525 people and is so large some airports have to be adjusted to accommodate it.

The two companies are also challenging each other in legal arenas. They are locked in an international trade dispute with the World Trade Organization in Geneva, each claiming that the other receives illegal state subsidies.

Airbus' fortunes have been mixed in recent years. Until 2012 it was selling more planes than Boeing but it has also ran into more technical problems, notably with the A380. It sold only nine of those superjumbos last year.

Bregier and his fellow officials at Airbus avoided any smug remarks over their rival's current troubles.

"It's not our place to give Boeing lessons, we've had our own problems in the past," Bregier said. "I honestly wish all the best to my colleagues at Boeing to put this aircraft back in flight. I don't bet on the difficulties of a competitor in order to build Airbus' success."

Industry experts warned against assuming that Boeing's troubles could help Airbus, even though shares in its parent company, EADS NV, have been rising this week as Boeing's have been falling.

That's not just because airlines are unlikely to cancel orders en masse without yet knowing the cause of the error, but also because an investigation in what caused Boeing's battery problems may throw up new regulatory hurdles for Airbus.

Sandy Morris, an aerospace analyst with Jefferies in London, noted that the Dreamliner had been flight tested for thousands of hours. That it reveals problems now may lead authorities to conclude that the certification process had not been tough enough.

"If the authorities get more stringent and take more time to certify planes, the first to be affected is going to be Airbus, which happens to be the next major company launching a plane, (the A350)," Morris said.

Airbus expects the A350's inaugural flight to be just before or after the Paris air show in June.

Looking ahead, chief salesman John Leahy pledged he'd get at least 25 orders for the massive A380 jets this year and expects to deliver 25. Airbus sold only nine and delivered 30 last year.

Bregier said the cause of the technical problems affecting the A380 had been found

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and a solution was being put in place for the nine airlines currently flying the giant aircraft.

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