

AIR TRANSPORT

A350 'Perfectly on Track' as Airbus Delivers Finnair's First

by Guillaume Lecompte-Boinet - October 7, 2015, 12:17 PM



Airbus CEO Fabrice Bregier (left) congratulates Finnair CEO Pekka Vauramo upon delivery of the first Finnair A350. (Photo: Airbus)

During a ceremony in Toulouse to celebrate delivery of Finnair's first A350-900 on Wednesday, Airbus CEO Fabrice Brégier reported that the program remains "perfectly on track" for delivery of 15 airplanes this year. Finnair's A350 marked the seventh delivery since certification and the first to a European operator. Brégier said also that Airbus will more than double deliveries in 2016, and will reach a monthly rate of 10 aircraft by the beginning of 2018.

Regarding the future A350-1000, a longer version of the A350-900 that can seat 366 passengers in a three-class cabin layout, the CEO confirmed entry into service in the summer of 2017. Airbus plans to install the first Rolls-Royce Trent engine on an A380 soon to start test flights. This first campaign will prove quite short and end with the first flight of the A350-1000, scheduled for mid-2016, said Airbus. Then certification of the program will involve three aircraft. Regarding production, Airbus plants at Broughton, UK; Saint-Nazaire, France; and Hamburg; have all begun preparing to deliver their shipsets to Toulouse for start of final assembly in the first quarter of next year.

Brégier acknowledged that "A350 ramp-up is of course challenging." Airbus has to cope with delivery delays of some cabin suppliers, notably its French seat maker, Zodiac. "We are working with them to solve the problems, and anyway, all our programs are suffering from this situation," he said. In the short term, Airbus sent its own

personnel to help Zodiac. And in the longer term, the airframer will provide tools to help them to adapt their processes. "Most of the cabin suppliers are in heavy tensions because of the ramp-up," added Didier Evrard, former A350 program manager and now Airbus's executive vice president and head of programs.

Another challenge involves the number of "heads of version," or an operator's first airplane, that Airbus must deliver in a short time: three this year to Finnair, Vietnam Airlines and, very soon, Brazil's TAM. The airframer must deliver at least four more heads of version next year, to Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines, Ethiopian and Lufthansa. Consequently, Airbus has reinforced its final assembly line by adding four work stations at different steps. The production cycle at Toulouse, which now takes several months, will reach between seven and 11 weeks by the end of 2017.

Regarding the A350's weight, Finnair CEO Pekka Vauramo downplayed any suggestion of a problem. "It's not a problem...just few hundreds of kilos to win, and it will be done," he insisted. Finnair's CEO also expressed confidence in Airbus's fuel burn performance specifications, which claim a 25-percent improvement over the current generation A330.

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