



First Flight for Boeing's New 787 Dreamliner

THE AIRCRAFT HAS PERFORMED REMARKABLY

Boeing's new 787 Dreamliner jet has taken to the skies for the first time, in a critical milestone for the problem-plagued aircraft seen as key to the future of the US aerospace giant.

Under dreary skies, the Dreamliner took off at 10.27am to loud applause from those gathered at Paine Field near Boeing's plant in the western state of Washington.

The first flight of the revolutionary new "green" passenger jet comes after more than two

years of production problems that pushed back delivery of the first plane to Japanese carrier All Nippon Airways to late 2010.

Boeing is hanging its future hopes on the plane - its first new model in over a decade which draws on the huge advances made in aviation technology and is capable of flying long-haul routes using up to 20 per cent less fuel.

Up to 50 per cent of the mid-size, twin-aisle 787 Dreamliner is made of lightweight composite materials, such as carbon fibre-reinforced resin, compared with 12 per cent on the Boeing 777, contributing to fuel efficiency, the company said.

The aircraft, striped in turquoise and with 787 emblazoned on its tail, passed its final functional tests on Saturday to be cleared for Tuesday's test flight - expected to last more than five-and-a-half hours - over Puget Sound and Washington state.

On the maiden flight, captains Mike Carriker and Randy Neville will test key systems, such as the environmental control systems, hydraulics, structures and engines, and stability.

Onboard equipment will record and transmit real-time data to a test team, the company said.

During the final taxi testing on Saturday, the plane reached a top speed of about 130 knots (240km/h), and the pilots lifted the nose gear from the pavement, Boeing said.

"Our pilots told me the airplane performed beautifully," said Mike Delaney, vice president and chief project engineer for the 787.

"We're going through and analysing the data to ensure we're ready for first flight. From evaluations we've done so far, everything looks good."

Chicago-based Boeing, vying with European rival Airbus for commercial supremacy, is betting its cutting-edge Dreamliner is the winning vision for the future of global commercial aviation.

The promise of lower fuel costs in a sector where profit margins are already razor-thin has whet the appetites of several key players in the airline industry.

Tuesday's test-flight confirmed Boeing's latest calendar, as announced in June, after five previous delays in the 787 Dreamliner program to fix a structural problem.

Boeing launched the program in April 2004 and initially had planned to deliver the first plane to ANA in the first half of 2008, a delivery now set for late 2010.

It faces stiff competition in the commercial aviation market from Airbus, a unit of the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company.

Airbus is working on a new long-haul A350 plane aimed at competing with the Dreamliner and expected to fly in mid-2013.

Boeing says it has 840 orders on its books from 55 customers

for the cutting-edge plane, which it claims is the "fastest-selling all-new jetliner in aviation history."

United Airlines announced last week it would buy 25 Dreamliners, as well as 25 A350s, with the option to buy 50 more of each aircraft.

But the series of delays in the 787 program contributed to a \$US1.6 billion (\$1.75 billion) loss in the third quarter and Boeing has slashed this year's earnings guidance by more than a third.

Airline companies that have announced cancelled orders for the delay-plagued 787 include Russian carrier S7, Dubai-based aircraft leasing company LCAL and Australia's Qantas.

Five facts about the 787 Dreamliner

* The 787 Dreamliner promises greater fuel efficiency through the use of durable, light-weight composite materials.

* Planes in the 787 family have list prices between \$US150 million and \$US205.5 million.

* Boeing has taken orders for 840 Dreamliners.

* The most recent delay results from a structural problem within the side-of-body joint of the aircraft - the connection of the wing to the fuselage.

* The 787 will use 20 per cent less fuel for comparable missions in similarly sized airplanes

AFP/Reuters

